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Teachers in Flight

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BADGER INSTITUTE

Listening to what teachers are saying

Wisconsin's public school teachers are leaving their classrooms at higher rates than they have in more than 25 years — some to other school districts, some out of the field entirely.

We know exactly how many teachers are leaving and who they are because we analyzed Wisconsin's publicly available database of every teacher in every school district over the past three decades.

The Badger Institute 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.

But numbers only go so far.

We wanted to hear from teachers themselves. To do that, we surveyed teachers who'd left some districts with especially high turnover rates, including one, Beloit, with the highest rate of teacher loss among medium- or large-sized districts in the state. Then we conducted in-depth interviews with a set of teachers willing to tell us in detail what drove them to leave.

What they told us was eye-opening, and from the accounts of guns in backpacks and capricious leadership, some common themes emerged. Teachers leave when schools are mismanaged, when disorder isn't properly handled, when they're prevented from doing the work they chose. Especially poignant: the affection many departing teachers still had for the places they were leaving.

Coming next will be a look at a sector of Wisconsin schools that the state's turnover data does not cover: independent charter schools and private schools. They operate in a similar market for teaching talent but face some distinct challenges and advantages.

Also coming soon is an outline of potential policy responses to Wisconsin's teacher turnover problem: What can we do to hang on to educators and to expand the talent pipeline?

Picking the right options starts with both defining the problem — we urge readers to see our previous work, as well as a look at whether teaching good character can improve a school's culture — and with listening to what teachers themselves are saying.

Here, we present their voices.

Teachers in flight

What's really driving educators out of Wisconsin's classrooms

Badger Institute research shows that teachers are leaving their schools at higher rates than they have in more than 25 years, some leaving public education entirely, and many others transferring between districts.

But numbers take us only so far. It's crucial to listen to teachers' voices, to hear them explain what about their work experience led them to retire early, to work in another district or leave for another career.

Here, we distill the conversations we had with teachers who left six public school districts of varying sizes throughout the state with particularly high loss rates: Ashland, Beloit, Brown Deer, Marshall, Palmyra-Eagle and Winter. We also interviewed teachers who left the Beloit Turner district, which had an average rate of turnover, as a check for factors unique to the greater Beloit area.

The teachers we interviewed all left between the 2019-20 and 2023-24 school years.

We relate what teachers told us led them to leave, and we document patterns.

Why these districts?

The School District of Beloit's teacher loss rate between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years was the highest in the entire state among medium and large districts, including every district in the state with at least half as many teachers on staff as Beloit.

The problem was not a one-time phenomenon. The district lost almost a quarter of its teachers on average during or right after the 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years — far higher than the loss rates for those years for both the state as a whole and the adjacent School District of Beloit Turner. A complete copy of a statistical brief on teacher loss in Beloit is contained in the appendix.

Beloit lost the most teachers, 415, over the time period we examined and, as a result, we were able to talk to more teachers there than in the other districts.[1] The districts we looked at elsewhere in the state, all considerably smaller than Beloit, were among the top 30 districts for teacher turnover in the past five years. They lost between 23 and 85 teachers over the time period examined.

What we did and why

We used the Department of Public Instruction's publicly available database to identify all teachers who left each one of the districts over the five-year timeframe.

Using a third-party service, we found email contact information for them. We sent our statistical brief that lays out what we know about turnover rates, a link to an online survey about their own reasons for leaving the district, and an invitation to talk with one of our researchers.

The six-question online survey was sent to all educators in the districts for whom we were able to gather email addresses. For instance, it was sent to 221 educators who had left the School District of Beloit. Eleven former teachers in Beloit were

1 The Badger Institute submitted a request for copies of all Beloit teacher exit-interviews on July 15, 2025, and followed up with a formal Open Records request on Sept. 10, 2025. The district acknowledged receipt of the request on Sept. 19, 2025, but still has not produced the records. We asked on Nov. 24 for an update on when we might receive the requested records and were told by a Nov. 25 email that no such estimate was available.

interviewed. Ten agreed to be interviewed in other districts for a total of 21.

Interviews were conducted over the phone by four individuals, all former newspaper journalists. All interviewees' identities are known to the Badger Institute, though names are not used in this paper to respect the educators' varying levels of willingness to be publicly identified.

Findings: An executive summary

Many of the teachers we interviewed loved teaching but were overwhelmed by what they saw as poorly managed conditions.

"I loved it. It was a great career. I can't imagine doing anything else," one 24-year veteran of Beloit put it. "It's so cool: When they come in, they can barely write their name. And in June they're leaving reading and writing."

Enthusiasm was eroded, however, by multiple issues.

The clearest theme to emerge is that leadership and management matter at both the central office and school level. Done incompetently and, as one teacher put it, Sunday nights are overtaken with regret about what's coming Monday morning. Enough bungling, and teachers decide to do something else with their Mondays.

This sample of teachers says the Beloit district is managed badly, from revolving-door superintendents who successively pile on new initiatives and abandon priorities of a few years before, to principals who seem afraid of children and manage student outbursts and violence poorly.

They say that the mismanagement that makes teachers bolt is sometimes well-intended but gone awry, sometimes capricious. A rule about where teachers can eat lunch, for instance, made one teacher finally say she'd had enough.

Other themes involved social factors: students' chaotic home lives intruding on school, a fall in parental support for education, a rise in an atmosphere of strife surrounding the district. Some cited pay and benefits, but that was a minority. A greater number cited the workload that resulted from insufficient staffing.

Similar themes emerged in interviews with teachers in smaller districts, though mismanagement at the level of district governance was a much less evident theme.

A detailed look at the educators' responses follows.

Mismanagement

The School District of Beloit has had seven superintendents, not counting interim placeholders, in the past 20 school years, including one who lasted six months.

The result, say former teachers, is instability.

"I had six superintendents in 11 years. So there was always new initiatives coming down the pipe," said a Beloit native who left in 2019 and has since won a teacher of the year award in his field. "It was always a fire of, 'Hey, we have to try these 900 different initiatives and curriculums and programs that are going to raise scores.'"

Another, a second-career teacher who retired after many years in the high school, said, "There were constant changes in leadership. I think I had 14 principals. Probably had at least nine superintendents, once you count the interim superintendents."

It wasn't always like this, said a 35-year veteran of the district who retired in 2020, five years before she planned to: "Beloit used to be a great district to work for," she said. "It was all put together. We knew what we were doing. And then we would start switching administrators. Then administrators started climbing ladders. And they'd come in and they'd go out and they'd come in and they'd go out. Every time they came in, a new initiative came in."

A 15-year teacher who retired in 2020 said, "To me, part of the problem was hiring superintendents who were not the right fit, who didn't understand

the community, who were trying to use us as a steppingstone, didn't live in the community."

The change reached the school level, as she saw it: "Veteran principals and superintendents left," to be replaced by others who "just saw it as a revolving door. And that's not good for kids, and that's not good for staff."

A teacher who retired at 60 in 2020 after 35 years noted that Beloit's reputation as a district with many poor and minority students played into the resume-building. "About 10, 15 years ago … we started switching superintendents every three to five years — when we got caught in the, 'I'm going to use Beloit as my, I've been in a diverse community' superintendent, 'so now I can move up,'" that teacher said.

Among teachers in other districts, district-level leadership failures were mentioned much less often, though they were not entirely absent.

Several cited superintendents whose poor managerial skills were a repelling factor.

In the Palmyra-Eagle Area School District, the superintendent's failure to respond to staff "felt like, instead of working with us and collaborating with us, it was kind of this feeling of being against us for some reason," said one teacher.

A teacher in the rural School District of Winter in northern Wisconsin cited changes following the pandemic: "You saw a lot of turnover from people who had been on school boards for decades — they didn't want to have to deal with it — and so you have a lot of new members that don't really understand what the role of the school board is and they see it more as day-to-day operations rather than that long-term vision."

None, however, cited leadership chaos or political infighting in the way that Beloit teachers did.

Principals

While criticism of Beloit's top leadership was common, comments were more mixed when talking about principals. Several teachers made a point of praising, by name, principals they felt protected staff and students from chaos above them. "Our administrator there … was fantastic," said a 35-year high school teacher. "She was so constrained by what central office put on her table that I just I really admire her and respect her because she fought so hard for anything we got at that school. And she shouldn't have had to."

But others told of principals who were unfit for the job. A teacher who left in 2022 after seven years described one new principal who "broke down a few times in meetings, like over some district gossip." She would arrive only minutes before the school day began, he said. "We stopped inviting her (to teacher meetings) at the end because she would just say distracting things. … We just started having meetings without her."

A second-career teacher with previous experience in human resources faulted principals' training and its effect on staff: "It was a lack of consistency and putting another Band-Aid or a new approach to somebody else's new idea that they wanted to try that kept causing chaos with teachers.

"I believe that's a bigger state issue. I believe we do not train principals, nor do we train superintendents at an educational level to really run a school," she said.

"A lot of (principals) failed quickly within the first six months, and they were gone within six months to a year. … Relationship-building was part of it, but lack of understanding of the schools, lack of understanding of students. Honestly, they just didn't have what it takes to be a principal."

The 35-year Beloit veteran who retired at 60 cited the discouraging effect on teachers of the way a new faculty dress code was enforced — by staff-wide email. "The memo that comes out with, you know, 'Please adhere to the dress code.' No, go to the person who's having the issue and talk to them. Don't send the blanket email out to everybody, making me wonder, 'Did I wear something I wasn't supposed to wear?'" She faulted the

principal as lacking spine: "They don't address the person because they're afraid of, you know, confrontation."

The second-career Beloit teacher who retired after 18 years noted a dynamic of dysfunction between district and school leadership: Principals "don't want to make waves, don't want the issue to go above them," he said, and it's because "We've had some superintendents who have been just assholes, narcissistic assholes." It made a difference in his case: He said he didn't want to retire, "but I was so frustrated with lack of follow-through on initiatives I and others would take." Weak leadership and constantly shifting priorities torpedo attempts at innovative high school programs and discourage teachers from taking part in them, he said. "And the teachers are the only goddamn glue you have."

Complaints about mismanagement usually came when teachers were asked to elaborate on the most frequently checked reasons for dissatisfaction on the initial email survey: "working conditions," "disorder in school," "I was not supported in setting high expectations for learning and achievement," or "school or district leadership."

When teachers felt unsupported, it often meant specific failures by those managing their work environments.

In other, smaller districts, while several teachers went out of their way to compliment principals — one praised a principal for trying to change a complacent, low-achievement staff culture, for instance — many made clear that having a bad principal was a major factor.

A teacher who left the School District of Brown Deer cited a principal as "the main one that kind of made life miserable. I was tired of getting scolded."

The principal used a book cataloguing poor teaching: "He literally read this book from one cover to the next to the staff. This is a 200-page book. ... He didn't give us the book. He just read it to us." It felt less like guidance than scorn: "That, I think, summed up how he felt about us."

Another teacher faulted a supervisor for poor management technique. "She would just write you mean emails — 'You're not doing this right' — with very little support as to how to fix it." The administrator's "main means of communication was through rather nasty emails," the teacher said. "I don't think she was too hot of a people person."

"I never saw myself threatening to quit education because I love it," said a teacher in Marshall. "And then after a year there, I was like, I need to get the hell out of this because … you're not treated very well."

One Brown Deer teacher who left K-12 education after 15 years' experience over frustrations with poor management said, "It was just a decision where it was like, my mental health is more important than a paycheck or even career goals."

"It was really, really depressing."

Responding to disorder

A number of examples of mismanagement from Beloit center on how schools handle disorder.

"I had a little guy and I adored him. He adored me," said a teacher who retired at 60 in 2020. "He would sit up on the top of the lockers on a little wall like a gargoyle. Okay, that's six feet up. … He wouldn't come down. Had he fallen, whose fault would it be? It would be mine, without question. … Would administration have said, 'Oh no, that was our fault because we didn't get up there fast enough to help her?' No. It would not have been them. It would have been my fault. But I'm not allowed to touch him. I'm not allowed to help him down off the wall. I'm not allowed to do anything to get him off the wall." Why? A new district policy: "You weren't allowed to put your hands on children. … When did that start? Probably five years ago."

Another student, she said, "would get angry at another little friend, would flip my whole bookcase. If someone were in the way, they would get hurt," but she was constrained by policy from stopping

him. "Then the little guy grabbed my forearm and whacked my arm into the corner of the bookcase. … I said, 'You can either move him to the other room, or I am done. I'm transferring to a different school.'" Only at that point, administrators moved the child.

Sometimes the failures were well-intentioned — and frequently changing — initiatives.

"Every superintendent we had had a different expectation of behavior," which led all the building principals to change the way misbehavior was managed, said the Beloit native who left in 2019. "Well, that shit changed every year." The policy shifted from disrespect, insubordination and violence meriting automatic punishments to, as he put it, "'Hey, we want you to have a buddy role. The first thing is you need to give an in-class warning. Then you need to give them a buddy room when they fill out a reflection sheet. Then they need to come back and you need to talk to them about the reflection sheet.' … I have a class of 35 kids. So you want me to pause my class and do that every time there's a disruption in my class and then have like a two- or three-minute meeting with that kid — while I'm teaching the class. I'd be in the hallway trying to have this mini conference … then the classroom is a zoo."

> The 35-year veteran who retired early in 2020 described a decisive close call: "Then there was an incident with a second-grader across the hall who brought a gun to school in his backpack, but he brought the wrong clip for the gun. And I thought, I don't need to do this anymore."

Other times, school leadership simply didn't enforce order.

A 29-year veteran middle-school teacher who retired, then returned when the district was pleading for teachers, before throwing in the towel in 2022, said principals were not supportive. Of one, she said, "I think she was afraid of the kids."

One particularly disruptive seventh-grader, whose mother worked as a security officer in the building, responded to a de-escalating "time out" by bolting to find his mother. "He left the room, and all the way down the hallway he kept calling me a fucking bitch at the top of his lungs." After the boy went into his mother's office, the principal "told me that I'm not to worry about it, that she would talk to the mom, but nothing ever happened."

"If they would have followed the code book like it was written for discipline, I guess I would have made it," the teacher said. She would have stayed on longer.

Other teachers gave similar accounts. One who left in 2020 after four years to take a job in a different district described how she physically intervened after a boy attacked a girl on the playground. "I called for security, but no one showed up." Eventually, an assistant principal summoned security and the boy was taken away and suspended. "That boy showed up the next day" at her classroom, she said. "I had to lock my classroom door and he was there for about 15 minutes" before security removed him. She said teachers were encouraged not to write discipline referrals in such cases.

"Administrative support was there when it came to academics, but when it came to behavior, it was the wild west. It was a free-for-all," said another. "We had to fill out eight, nine different steps before we could even consider sending the

kid down to the office."

Another, a long-time Beloiter who earned her certification in 2022 and has since left for a district in Illinois — "and I really like it" — cited the third-grade classroom across the hall from hers. The class "had so many issues with behavior, like literally throwing chairs, and she would have to evacuate the whole classroom," the teacher said. "It was all the time — I would say at least once a week."

A 30-year veteran of teaching primary grades in Beloit shifted for the last eight years of her career with the district to a role coaching other teachers. The shift was decisive: "I probably would have retired earlier if I hadn't left the classroom and gone into that coaching role," she said. "The student behaviors, lack of support from administration and the demands on teachers were really getting worse every year."

The administration's failure to address behavior problems, she said, was the biggest factor: "I don't even know what the answer was but to do something to help improve the behaviors in the classroom."

A frequent element of teachers' complaints was that the situation was worsening in recent years — both behavior and administrators' response.

"The whole thing with kids leaving the classroom and just running through the building —I mean, that didn't happen 15 years ago. They just go out the door and start running away. Just running down the halls. Run, run, run. Run and hide. Run and play," said the 35-year veteran who retired at 60. "You can't chase them, so it becomes a big game. And they can't be sent home for that. That's the other thing: Parents don't answer their phones anymore — I mean, the ones who are truly a problem, parents don't answer their phones."

A veteran high school teacher said cell phones — and the school's response to them — led to trouble. "It really made teaching difficult," slowing the speed at which material could be taught, "because of phones: Kids were using phones in class. And you're supposed to enforce the no-cellphone policy." He would refer students for discipline for their in-class cell phone use, but administrators "don't want it to look bad on the state report card, so the matter never gets resolved. So you stop fighting the battle over cell phones. I tell you put your phone away, you say, 'Fuck your mother.' Then what? Or your mother's calling you on your cell phone in class."

> "For the most part, it was a consensus like, 'This isn't healthy.' … Yes, we're teaching children in trauma, which is difficult. But what do you do when you're a teacher teaching in trauma every single day? Because that's really what it was. Sunday night was the worst night of the week, because you regretted having to go to work on Monday."

He said that in 2022 he needed 66 stitches and foot surgery after he was injured breaking up a five-student fight. Notably, he related the incident only late in the interview with him, and only in the context of faulting the district's administration for its poor management of disorder.

"I blame the school for not onboarding newly arrived kids," he said, noting that the district has experienced an influx of students from harsh backgrounds. "Children come up from Chicago, and their hair was on fire: Mom's in jail, dad's dead, grandma's taking care of them, and they send them up to a better school — and we do nothing to onboard them. They're not prepared to handle responsibility as chil-

dren from a less chaotic background would be. I blame us, not the kids," he said.

A few of the teachers linked the change in behavior to disruptions related to the covid pandemic. The seven-year teacher who left in 2022 said, "Everything was turned up. The kids you could normally rely on to work independently while you can focus on the kids that need extra help weren't able to do that anymore." Children returned to in-person learning in April 2021, and behavior had worsened: "When they came back from covid, the basics weren't there. … You'd say, here's a seating chart. Here's where you're all sitting. … And they'd be like, no, I'm not sitting there. And it would be a fight for weeks to get them to sit in the seat that you gave them."

The 35-year veteran who retired early in 2020 described a decisive close call: "Then there was an incident with a second-grader across the hall who brought a gun to school in his backpack, but he brought the wrong clip for the gun. And I thought, I don't need to do this anymore."

Disorder and poor management of it emerged as a problem in other districts, too.

"I spent most of my time in the weeds with behavioral issues," said a teacher who left the Winter district

"A lot of things were tolerated," said a teacher who left Ashland. "There was not much removing the kids from the classroom when they were really disrupting the learning process." When he tried to physically restrain a student who'd previously bitten him from disrupting class, "he punched me square in the face." The teacher felt supervisors were unsympathetic afterward. But, he said, "a few weeks later, his parents pulled him from the school because he had stabbed another teacher with a fork."

Even smaller offenses, such as persistent rudeness from students, are wearing. A teacher, now at a school where he says discipline is better enforced, put his calculation this way: "I was driving 50 minutes to, excuse my language, but essentially get shit on, you know." Most students were friendly, he said, but "there were certain ones that just were not held in check."

Administrators need to work harder at stemming disorder, said a former Brown Deer teacher. "If you don't know discipline and behavior, you shouldn't do it because that's a big part of your job and your day. And if you can't do it, you better be trying to get better at it."

"I'm sorry, but if a kid goes off on me," said a teacher who left Marshall, and "just, you know, 'what the F-bomb' me in front of 20 other kids, in my opinion, they shouldn't be coming back to my classroom that day, five minutes later."

'This isn't healthy'

In Beloit, guns and injuries are on a far end of a spectrum that includes less dramatic instances of mismanagement that teacher still cited as wearing.

One, the Beloit native who moved to another Wisconsin district after 11 years, described the year that all his fellow seventh-grade teachers — seven in all — left. He stayed.

"There was massive burnout, lack of resources, lack of backup, lack of respect," he said.

"For the most part, it was a consensus like, 'This isn't healthy.' … Yes, we're teaching children in trauma, which is difficult. But what do you do when you're a teacher teaching in trauma every single day? Because that's really what it was. Sunday night was the worst night of the week, because you regretted having to go to work on Monday.

"It was no preps, because we were subbing for each other, because we couldn't find subs to come into the building, because behaviors were atrocious. You had 6:30 a.m. meetings in the morning on some weekdays, and then we were expected to stay until 4:30 on every Wednesday to have meetings. And it was always this sense of like, why aren't you doing more? Like, why aren't you coaching more sports? Why aren't you running more clubs? Why aren't you staying after

school?"

"I mean, there's a lot of days are just, at the end, we would just all kind of meet in the hallway and like slide down the wall and just sit in the hallway and stare at each other. Like, what are we doing?"

After the massive exodus, the school hired new teachers. "I stayed, was asked to be the mentor to all of the new seventh grade teachers without being trained in how to be a mentor," he said. He feels he did well, citing low suspension numbers and high test scores among seventh-graders, but says that because he doesn't speak Spanish or teach math, he was told more pay was out of the question. "That's when I started looking," he said.

As for the new teachers' performance, he said, "A lot of the credit goes to the people that we hired because we hired some absolute rock stars who are now crushing it in other districts."

Another, the 29-year middle-school teacher who returned from retirement, noted a change in the rate of turnover. "The first 10 years I was in Beloit, nobody ever quit after six weeks, and then all of a sudden that's what started to happen."

"It was a mess. That's all I can say."

Others noted the district's failure to timely fill vacancies. Math and science positions would be hard to fill, and in special education, "we always had openings until the first day of school." This meant chaos for teachers: "That first week of school, they could be teaching something completely different if we've got things that have to get filled in."

After the return to in-person learning, "We didn't have support," said a fifth-grade teacher. "We didn't have subs. We didn't have enough principals."

"We had a bad reputation at the school and no subs wanted to come," he said.

Other teachers cite particular signs of indifference from the district.

"Social studies was not a high priority for the administration," said one who left in 2019. "If it hadn't been for that I would have stayed there until I retired."

Another, hired for a dual-language curriculum, said the district botched the textbooks, buying too few and of the wrong sort: "We couldn't even really lesson-plan together," she said. "It was very frustrating."

One teacher cited the response when, in 2020, the district went to all online classes during the pandemic, and one of her students, living in a shelter, had no access to the internet. The only suggestion from the administration was that the student travel to a location that had wi-fi and connect. No other efforts were made.

Still another cited high-school science labs, equipped for 28 students at most, that ended up with 32 or more students. "Because they had cut teachers, there just wasn't space to put kids," she said. "You would just have random students placed in your classroom."

A 35-year veteran of the district's high school cited resistance to change at the district's central office. During the pandemic, "we had these virtual parent teacher conferences," she said. "I had almost 100 percent participation," which she surmises was because it meant a doable time commitment for busy parents. "It was fantastic. And (after we returned), we said, 'Can we keep that?' And the central administration came down and said, 'Nope, it's got to be in person now.'" Attendance by parents plummeted.

"Central office was all about keeping everything the same for every building. And I think that's a wrong philosophy."

For some teachers, the petty and capricious way in which they were managed was the last straw.

The 35-year high school teacher who retired at the end of 2023-24 cited the faculty dress code handed down once the Act 10 labor reforms gave greater latitude to the district in setting work rules. While another teacher noted the poor enforcement practices, this teacher cited its

existence as micromanagement: "The first thing that they came out with when we basically lost our contracts was, 'OK, this is what teachers can wear.' It was insane. You know, men couldn't wear sandals. … At first it was women had to wear dresses and then they backed off on that." She felt it was an "instantaneous" leap to a "crazy" level of control. "It never really changed. It just kept getting worse and worse."

Managerial whims have an impact. The 35-year veteran who described the close call with the gun-carrying child said that, while she ended up retiring at 60, "I was not going to retire until I was 65."

What made her leave early?

"I had a superintendent who would not allow any food or eating or drinking at your desk, even at your lunch hour. And I was a 60-year-old woman standing in a closet eating a salad. And I thought, 'This is ridiculous.'"

Community factors

No educators in our sample said they were driven to leave by poverty, by students' disordered family lives, or by lack of support from parents or the community.

But nearly half of the Beloit teachers answering our online survey cited "Lack of support from the community or negative interaction with parents" as a factor, and all but one of the teachers we interviewed addressed at least one community factor in greater depth.

Poverty

One factor that was not often mentioned was poverty.

Beloit is a district with a higher than average number of poor families. Among Wisconsin districts, it is sixth highest by the share of its students listed as "economically disadvantaged" — that is, eligible for free or reduced price lunch — at just under 70 percent in the most recent state figures. The median school district in Wisconsin is at 37.5 percent.

But to the extent teachers mentioned Beloit's poverty, it was to soften their commentary about parents.

"I don't think the parents in Beloit want or care less than the students and parents" elsewhere, said one teacher. "In Beloit, you have a lot of single parent households. I'm from a single parent household. So I get it. You have a lot of single parents who are struggling to make ends meet. And if for eight hours a day, they don't have to worry about one or two kids because they're at school all day, that's kind of a load off their plate."

If anything, he said, Beloit's low-income status was seen as bolstering a certain chip on the shoulder. "If you wear a Beloit shirt in Wisconsin, there's a certain reputation that you get. … There's a sense of pride if you are from Beloit, you work in Beloit. Like it's Beloit versus everyone."

One teacher told of how, working late one night, "there was a team from Janesville, I think, a volleyball team. They were running the halls just to warm up. And I heard the girls going down the hall. They're like, 'Oh, my God, this is better than our school. I thought I'd see gunshot holes in the walls.' I know the reputation Beloit has is just sad."

But none said that reputation sent them packing.

Similarly, teachers in other districts didn't cite poverty as a factor in leaving.

Several did note that prevalent drug use complicated teaching.

"There was a lot of fentanyl use and a lot of meth," said a teacher who left the Winter district. "Legitimately, all of the teachers know that if a student smells strongly of cat urine, their parents are probably making" meth.

Family disorder

What Beloit educators did cite as discouraging were the consequences of students' disorderly home lives.

Parents' disengagement with school "is another huge piece we miss. And that's why wealthier districts do well," said the teacher who retired at 60 after 35 years. "You tend to have a lot more parent involvement than you do with districts like Beloit."

"I have kids who are up at two o'clock in the morning watching TV."

It wasn't always so, said a long-time middle school teacher. "My first 11 or 12 years ... the students, the parent life was different too. Now both parents are working, no one's home, some are working double jobs, the kids are there by themselves. That's a big change."

Disorder followed students to school. "I would have students who did not have much emotional regularity, so if they got frustrated or angry they would throw things, they would tip over chairs, they would scream," said a multi-decade veteran of primary grades. "A lot of that, I think, came from that lack of emotional regulation. The schools do a lot to try to teach that in their guidance classes and lessons, you know, but I don't think that students are getting that at home like they used to."

> Some parents were intensely involved. She recalled one mother who took a direct approach after learning of her daughter's truancy. "She wore a shirt to school: 'I'm Susan's mom,' with her picture on it. And she followed her from class to class because she was skipping class. … And she said to her, 'If you ever skip again, I'm coming again. And I will sit here every single time.'"
>
> "Do you think she ever skipped again? No, she did not."

A long-time high school teacher said that home life led to absenteeism. "I would honestly say 90 percent were parent issues."

The high school teacher, just above, who expressed sympathy for single-parent families, noted as well how poverty affects well-intended initiatives. His school had a supply of toiletries for children who had none at home. "We got taken advantage of," he said.

"Some of our parents are like, 'Oh, well, if you're buying deodorant, why do I have to buy deodorant? If you're going to provide clothes, why do I have to provide clothes? You're going to serve my kids free breakfast and free lunch and they get a bag to go home with on the weekends, then I don't have to buy groceries."

"And, like, that's not how this works."

"We get a lot of shit from outside invading the classroom. You get kids who just hate other kids or trust nobody because nobody in their lives stuck around," said a high school teacher.

"I took a field trip to Milwaukee, went to the museum. We had 50-year-old parents who had never been to Milwaukee, never set foot in a museum — that's the stuff that people won't acknowledge," he said.

Parental support

Connected to chaotic home lives is reduced support from parents for the work of a school.

"My first almost 20 years, I was at a school that had families with pretty stable home lives, a little bit higher income and a lot of parent involvement," said a primary-grades teacher. Since then? Not so much. "Definitely, overall, the parent involvement has gotten less and less over time," she said. "A lot of the parents were not very supportive," said another.

"Some parents loved being called if their child was a little naughty," said one teacher, "and then there were some parents who you were the second, eighth teacher in a month that called them, and they were very frustrated or angry."

Some parents were intensely involved. She recalled one mother who took a direct approach after learning of her daughter's truancy. "She wore a shirt to school: 'I'm Susan's mom,' with her picture on it. And she followed her from class to class because she was skipping class. … And she said to her, 'If you ever skip again, I'm coming again. And I will sit here every single time.'"

"Do you think she ever skipped again? No, she did not."

One teacher noted the limits that outside chaos imposes on parental involvement: "There were plenty of parents you don't want around the classroom," at least not in a volunteer capacity. "Might not have enough literacy on their own to be a volunteer reading to kids. Or they might not pass the background check needed to volunteer at school."

A high school teacher who left Beloit and now works at a smaller district in northeastern Wisconsin contrasted the prevailing attitudes. While the term "helicopter parents" sometimes is applied to those who hover closely over their children's affairs, in his new district, many are well past that: "They are lawnmowers," he said. "They are on top of every assignment. Like the second I update the gradebook, I am getting 14 emails. 'Hey, why did I lose points? What's going on here? Why is this happening? Is there anything they can do to get better?'"

"And Beloit was the exact opposite of the spectrum. We would go months without hearing from parents. We would call, text, email. We have like our online Remind 101 app. We would have other ways to communicate when someone is home, like every way. And we won't get any support at all. And it was essentially the feeling that, 'Hey, from 8 to 3:30, my child is your responsibility. You figure it out.' So when we actually did get the parents in the room, it was almost like it was a hassle, like we were inconveniencing them with the behavior of their child."

> "And one went to H.R. and said, can you match this? And they said, we don't do that. And I'm like, 'Oh, they don't understand. We're living in a different world now. Teachers can jump ship. … The other district paid for it because they needed a chemistry teacher. Our district doesn't fight for the teachers they have. And that's very disappointing."

The contrast held, that teacher said, when it came to athletics. He coaches football, as he did in Beloit. "I come to meet the coaching staff and the kids, and I had eight dads there who were

just like, 'What do you need, coach? What do you need me to do? I'm here to volunteer my time.' And I was like, 'Excuse me? It's middle-school football.'"

"Never in a million years would that have happened (in Beloit). The idea of giving your time just because it's the right thing to do for your kid and other people's kids — unheard of. So day one, I was like, whoa, this is different. … Parents are there, they're volunteering, they're invested. Almost to the point where we have to tell them, hey, back up."

For some other districts' teachers, parental support was sometimes a problem. Parents in Winter, said one teacher, "prioritize the high school experience of having a good time over education." Many, she said, "don't expect their kids to go forward in their education."

For others, disordered home lives led to unreasonable expectations from supervisors. A teacher who left Brown Deer recalled a student who alternated between foster parents and his birth parents, who "don't bring him to school," meaning he scored poorly on tests. "And the principal was just like, 'Well, how do we fix this?' How the hell am I supposed to fix something like that? I'm not a judge. ... I'm not going to go and tell the judge or the parents, 'You need to get this shit together.'"

> Another teacher, who left teaching elementary grades in the neighboring Turner district after 21 years, was more blunt about the profession: "I was not mentored. I was thrown into a classroom with a pack of wolves."

Community strife

Several teachers alluded to what they feel is a sense of distrust or tension in the broader Beloit community.

A teacher who retired at 60 in 2020 cited a former school board member running a watchdog group, Eyes on Beloit, which the teacher called a "smear campaign." "It has its purpose. It's accountable and it holds the board accountable," she said. "But it gets petty and mean and names people."

"The problem is you have warring factions in our community," said the teacher who had served on a school board elsewhere. "Everyone has differing philosophy, but they forget about the kids."

"I haven't seen a referendum pass since I have lived here, which is very unfortunate," said a teacher who was a long-time Beloit resident. Her neighbors, she said, "feel like the school district itself doesn't know how to budget money. There's a lot of wasteful spending. They've been closing all these schools because their enrollment keeps dwindling."

She contrasted it with the surrounding Turner School District — where she open-enrolled her own sons: "Parents (in Beloit Turner) have money, they are very supportive of the school district, they are supportive of passing referendums for the school because they want their kids to have a good education."

A teacher noted that Beloit consolidated its middle schools to two — both of them well east of the Rock River that divides the city. "So if I'm a west side parent, why do I care about the School District of Beloit anymore? Of course, I'm going to look to send my kid to Clinton or Parkview or The Lincoln Academy."

"It's hard sometimes to justify giving so much money when you see so little return on your investment, if that makes sense — when you don't have the test scores and you're hemorrhaging kids

and there's all the turmoil with the school board constantly being in the news and things like that. At some point, you're just like, this isn't a good investment. This is toxic."

Three of the teachers we interviewed named or alluded to one of the unusual features of education in Beloit — the advent of a high-performing public charter school independent of the district and furnished with a new building by Beloit businesswoman and philanthropist Diane Hendricks.

"I am truly against a billionaire coming in and building a school and handpicking your kids. And then that's all you hear about in Beloit is this fantastic little academy," said one teacher. "And the Beloit schools do need some structure and some help, but the community then will not back the public schools."

It should be noted that the charter school, The Lincoln Academy, says it has no admission requirements other than Wisconsin residency.

A long-time high school teacher said the existence of the charter school presented what she sees as an unfair contrast. "We had Diane Hendricks, you know, ABC Supply, who started her own charter school. And it's been horrible, and it's horrible in the sense that the community is saying, 'Well, look what they're doing. Why aren't you doing that?'"

Professional life

What might be thought of as typically economic issues, such as pay and workload, came up less often, though teachers did mention them as factors in pushing them out.

Pay and benefits

Wisconsin's 2011 public sector labor reform law, Act 10, was mentioned by a few teachers. One, who taught 15 years at the high school until retiring in 2020, explicitly cited Act 10's effect on benefits, which unlike pay no longer had to be bargained. "They cut our benefits every year," she said.

"In 2012, during Act 10, I lost $10,000 that year. … You know, teachers used to have the best insurance because they didn't get paid well." But at that point, "insurance went from a $500 copay to an $8,000 deductible. Insurance went from we're going to pay 100 percent after your deductible to we're only going to pay 80 percent."

As another veteran teacher pointed out, most teachers knew pay levels would be lower than in other potential fields. "In the day, it wasn't the pay that brought teachers in. It really was the benefits. You could retire at 57, and you had healthcare until you were 65," she said. "And then they cut all that out."

She retired at 60.

Another teacher, who had worked earlier for the district as a human resources staffer, noted that Beloit didn't adapt quickly after the law granted districts the power to boost individual teachers' pay. "We lost five science teachers. And two of them were recruited from other districts that paid them significant bonuses because they were both chemistry and physics teachers," she said.

"And one went to H.R. and said, can you match this? And they said, we don't do that. And I'm like, 'Oh, they don't understand. We're living in a different world now. Teachers can jump ship. … The other district paid for it because they needed a chemistry teacher. Our district doesn't fight for the teachers they have. And that's very disappointing."

Act 10 and pay levels were mentioned by several teachers in other districts, too.

One from Palmyra lamented the reduced differential in employee benefits compared to other jobs, such as the end of post-retirement health coverage, and also the end of pay schedules that favor seniority. "Teachers that have been teaching twenty-something years were making the same as new teachers coming in," she said, "because teachers coming in can now bargain for what they want their starting salary to be."

Others noted more generally their districts' pay was low. One teacher who left the Marshall district for a different career, notes that she now makes about twice as much with less "burnout and struggling."

Another, who left the Brown Deer district, said, "When you start to see all the other problems pile up, the salary becomes a bigger deal."

Workload

Teaching makes unusual time demands: Teachers often must grade students' work after the school day is done, and they must have time to prepare lessons. Beloit teachers we interviewed often said such time was scarce or missing, in part because the district had difficulty retaining enough staff.

"They take your prep away because they don't have any subs, and so you have to fill in" for other teachers who had to be away, said a 35-year high school veteran. "You're telling me I have to give up my prep time where I'm prepping for three different science courses. It was just overwhelming."

Because she was a department chair, she picked up classes for which other teachers could not be found. "But I was tired, man. By the time I did that last year, I was ready to be done."

Others cited missing preparation time. "Classroom teachers have lost all of their school day prep time, so all the prep work that I would do those last couple of years were done at home in the evenings and the weekends," said a teacher who spent 30 years in elementary grades. "I'm not exaggerating when I say there are zero minutes to prep lessons. That was another factor: just the overwhelming amount of work, whether it be meetings or reporting out."

One teacher, who spent seven years with the district before leaving to become a technical writer, said, "I was like, 'Why am I doing this teaching thing when I can have a job that I leave and don't ever think about?'"

Others lamented the loss of mentoring for new teachers. "We older teachers had … time to make sure to figure out what works," said one teacher who began in the district in the 1980s. "Younger teachers are being thrown into situations where anything they try might not have the best success rate, and so they don't have that background to pull from, that experience to say, 'Well, years ago I tried this and it worked.'"

Another teacher, who left teaching elementary grades in the neighboring Turner district after 21 years, was more blunt about the profession: "I was not mentored. I was thrown into a classroom with a pack of wolves."

Regrets

The interviews reveal a remarkable reservoir of goodwill among most of the teachers for Beloit, which, despite a well-known college and in recent years a striking revitalization of downtown funded by the philanthropist Hendricks, had been seen for many years as a scruffy place. Many hinted at affection for the city or the school district.

It makes the district's mismanagement and other flaws all the more troubling.

"I loved Beloit. I never wanted to leave Beloit," said a teacher who moved to another Wisconsin city in 2019. "I wasn't going anywhere. That was it. … I was a Beloit kid. I lived two blocks away from my school. I never wanted to leave Beloit. I was super happy for the first seven, eight years of my time there. Just, like I said, something changed around 2014, 2015, and we couldn't keep teachers on board."

Including him.

Appendix

Beloit area public school teacher loss: data

By Wyatt Eichholz

The School District of Beloit's teacher loss rate between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years was the highest in the entire state among medium and large districts, including every district in the state with at least half as many teachers on staff as Beloit.

The problem was not a one-time phenomenon. The district lost almost a quarter of its teachers on average during or right after the 2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years — far higher than the loss rates for those years for both the state as a whole and the adjacent School District of Beloit Turner.

Teacher loss in school districts of Beloit and Turner

Loss from one school year to next	Beloit	Turner	Statewide average
2021-22 to 2022-23	26.90%	10.60%	13.10%
2022-23 to 2023-24	20.10%	13.90%	15.10%
2023-24 to 2024-25	24.70%	7.50%	14.00%
Average	*23.90%*	*10.70%*	*14.00%*

The difference between the two adjacent districts was particularly stark between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, when Beloit lost 24.7 percent of its teachers, more than three times the percentage loss in Turner.

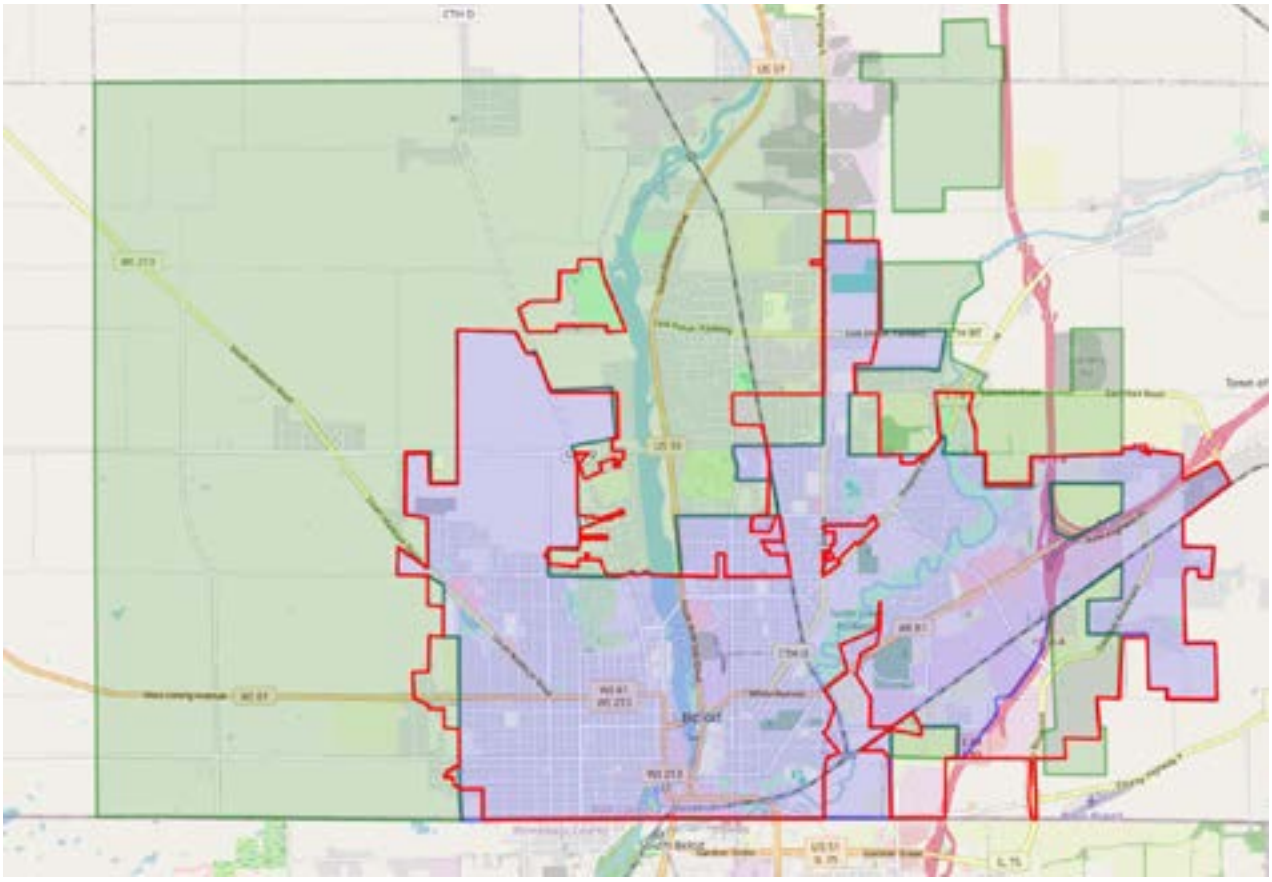
Looked at another way, only 51 percent of the 468 teachers in the Beloit district during the 2021-22 school year remained by the 2024-25 school year, an exceedingly high rate of churn.

The School District of Beloit has been steadily shedding student enrollment since 2015. In the last three years alone, the number of students in the district dropped from 5,534 to 5,165 to 5,098 to 4,958, decreases of 6.7 percent, 1.3 percent and 2.8 percent.

But the rate of teacher loss is much more precipitous than the rate of decrease in student enrollment, raising questions about why so many teachers are leaving, how they are being replaced, and how exceedingly high rates of churn and the loss of veteran teachers affect the students, and, indeed, the future of the district.

Beloit Area Map

The following map of the Beloit area shows how closely intertwined the two districts are. The area shaded in blue is the School District of Beloit. The areas shaded in green are Turner. The line in red demarcates the legal boundaries of the City of Beloit.

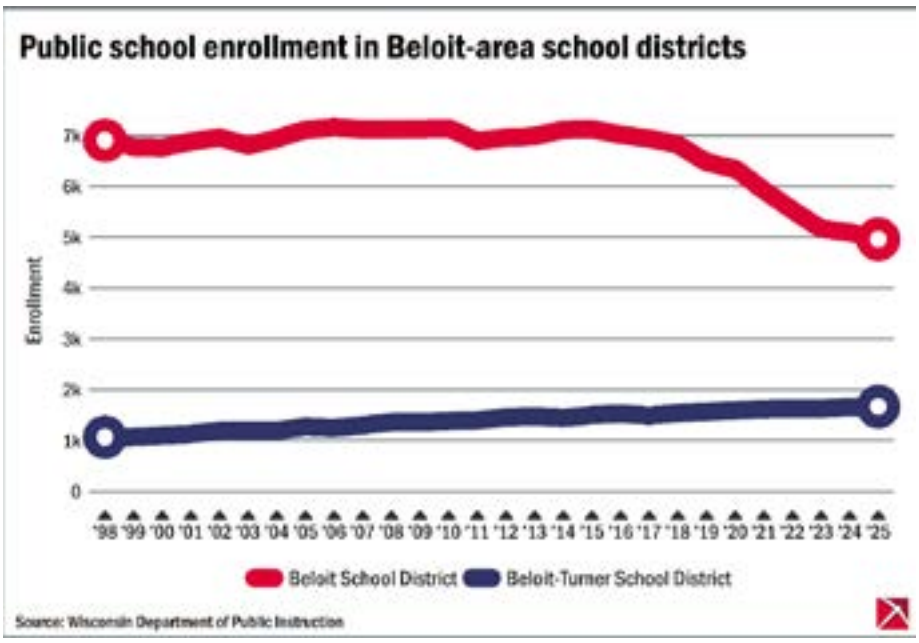


As the map shows, the boundaries between the City of Beloit and the School District of Beloit are not identical. There are parts of the city that cross into Turner. Nor are the district boundaries contiguous. In the northeast corner of the intersection of I-43 and I-90, there is an island of Turner — albeit undeveloped land — surrounded by the Beloit district.

Student enrollment in the two districts

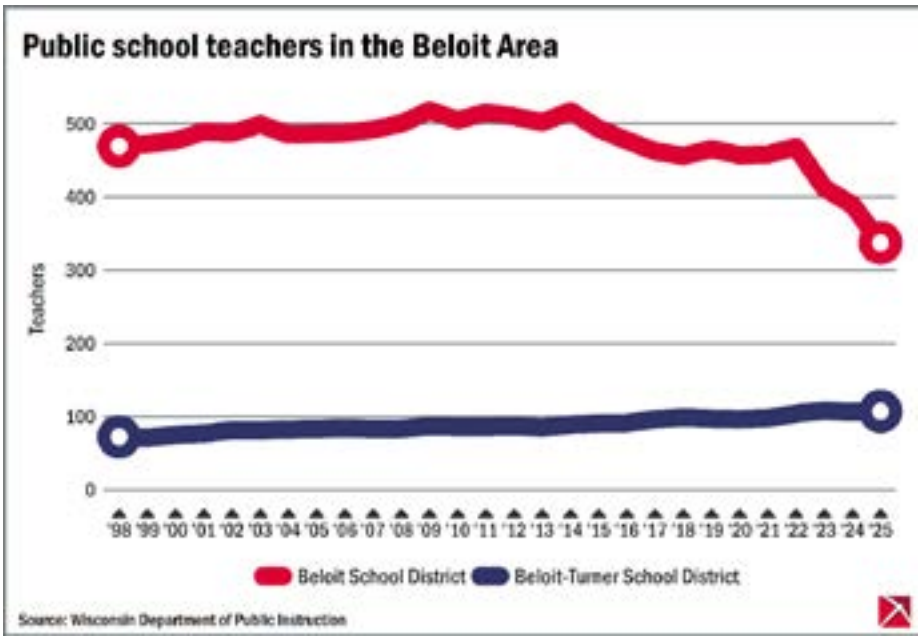
In 1998, the School District of Beloit enrolled just over 6,900 students. It hit a peak enrollment of 7,169 in 2006 but plummeted all the way down to 4,958 in the most recent school year — a 28 percent drop since 1998.

In 1998, Turner enrolled 1,068 students and, after years of increases, was up to 1,669 by the most recent school year — a 56 percent increase.



Much of the growth in the Turner district is the result of open-enrollment students who live in but do not want to attend other districts. In school year 2023-24, for instance, Turner gained 567 students and lost only 123 — a net gain of 444 — through public school open enrollment, the means by which families may send children to a public school district other than the one where they live. Beloit, meanwhile, lost 917 students through open enrollment and gained only 117, a net loss of 800. Many of those students likely transferred to Turner.

Without open enrollment transfers, Beloit would be down 21 percent between 2015 and 2024 instead of its actual decrease of 29 percent. As for Turner, rather than enrollment having increased by 10.8 percent between 2015 and 2024, enrollment would have decreased by 4 percent over that period without open enrollment.



Teacher numbers

The graph shows the estimated number of contracted teachers for each district based on Department of Public Instruction reports. Beloit reached its maximum teacher headcount in 2009 at 518 contracted teachers. That level remained steady until 2014 but declined to just 337 by the 2024-25 school year.

Meanwhile, Turner has increased headcounts at a consistent rate. In 1998, there were 72 teachers. In the most recent

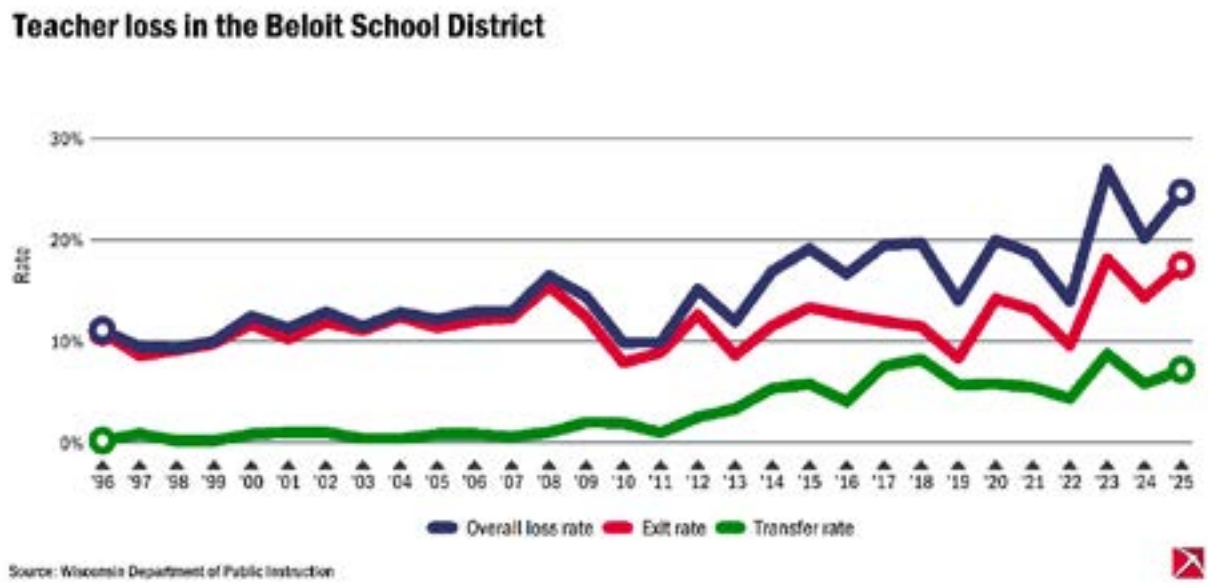
school year, 2024-25, the district reported a staff of 107 teachers.

Beloit's problems stand out in particular when compared to the district right next door. Turner has steadily increased student enrollment, has much lower rates of teacher loss and, in fact, is attracting both students and teachers from the School District of Beloit.

There were a handful of teachers who transferred from one of the districts to the other, but the direction was highly skewed. Over the 30 years of data available, 23 teachers transferred out of the School District of Beloit directly into Turner, while only seven transferred from Turner into Beloit. The largest transfer occurred after the 2019-20 school year, when five teachers left Beloit for Turner.

Teacher-student ratios, after diverging for years, are quite similar. There were 6.8 teachers per 100 students in Beloit and 6.4 per 100 students in Turner during the school year 2024-25.

District Loss Rate

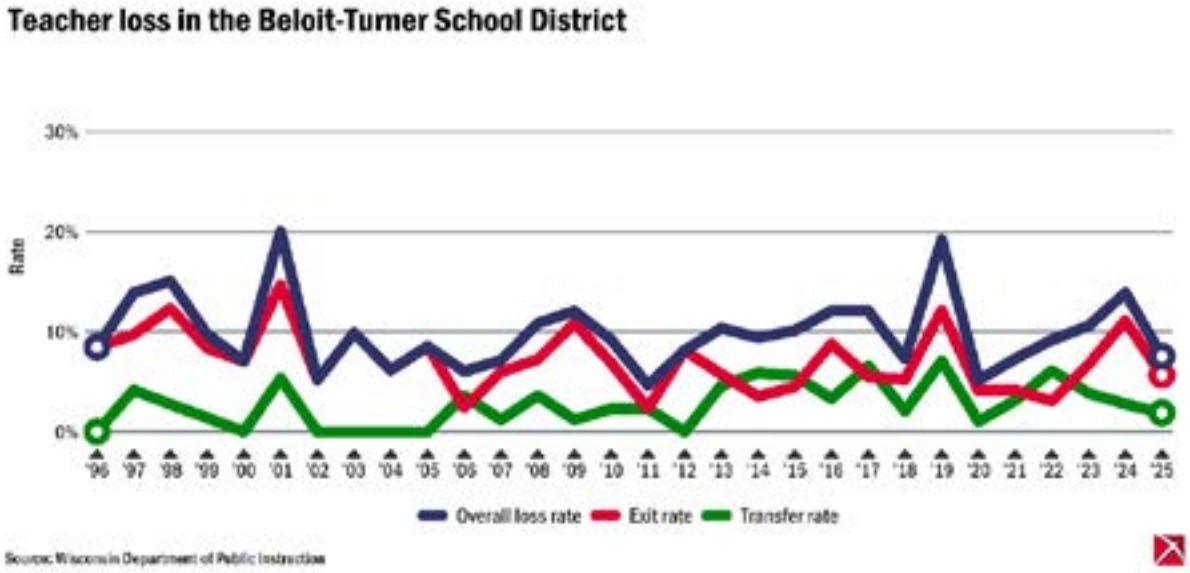


The graph above breaks down the loss rate for the School District of Beloit. The top line, in blue, shows the total loss rate, while the red and green lines show the two subsets: exits and transfers. Exits are teachers who have left public teaching in Wisconsin entirely; transfers are teachers who have left to work in another public school district.

Exits have moved upward over the past five years and in the school year 2024-25 were 17.5 percent. Transfers, which were a negligible component in the pre-Act 10 era, have grown to a substantial share of teacher loss as well — between 6 and 9 percent of faculty annually — over the past decade. The confluence of these two trends has created the highest levels of overall teacher loss seen in the district over the past 30 years.

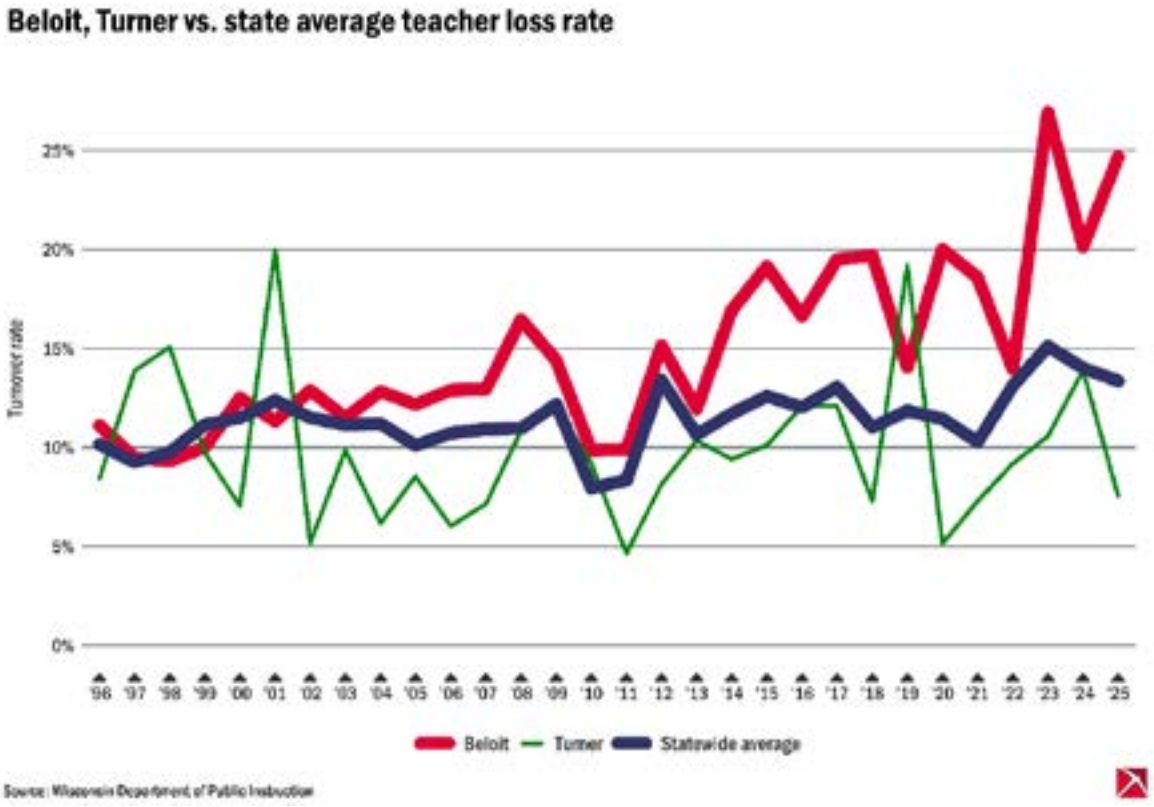
Teacher loss in Turner is a different story. The overall rate, with some fluctuation, has gone slowly but generally down over the past three decades and was 7.5 percent in 2024-25. Transfers to other districts are minimal, only 1.89 percent in 2024-25.

In the most recent year, teacher loss in Beloit was 24.7 percent while teacher loss in Turner was 7.5 percent.



District Loss Rate: Statewide Comparison

Compared to the rest of the state, the situation in Beloit is rapidly deteriorating. As the figure above shows, the School District of Beloit's loss rate (in red) has deviated sharply from the statewide average (in blue) by fully five percentage points or more in recent years — and is trending upward at a faster rate than the rest of the state. On the other hand, the Turner loss rate (in green) has largely tracked the statewide average rate, and it often came in lower.



Comparison of Beloit to other districts

Beloit's loss rate between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years was the 21st highest in the state, placing it in the 95th percentile. Each of the districts with higher turnover was significantly smaller, however, and smaller districts tend to have more variable loss rates over time since the departure of relatively few teachers can have a significant impact on the loss rate.

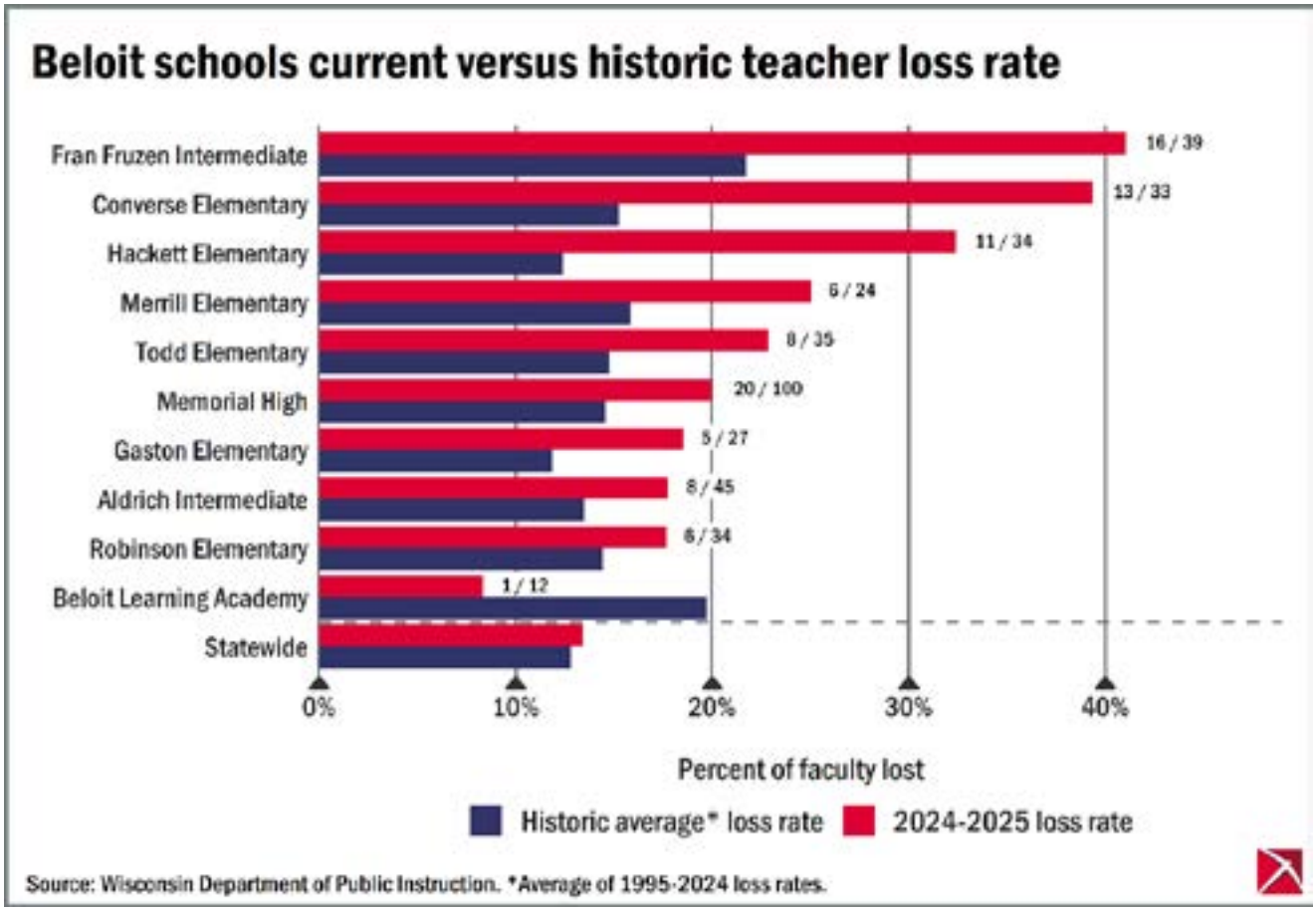
When compared to all medium or large districts — that is, those with at least 195 teachers, or half Beloit's size — Beloit had the highest turnover. The table below lists every school district with at least 195 teachers in 2024 and a loss rate in the 50th percentile or greater.

Rank	District	Headcount	Departures	Teacher loss rate
1	Beloit	389	96	24.7%
2	Burlington Area	211	45	21.3%
3	Baraboo	222	47	21.2%
4	West Allis-West Milwaukee	518	100	19.3%
5	South Milwaukee	212	39	18.4%
6	Racine Unified	1,302	224	17.2%
7	Fond du Lac	461	79	17.1%
8	Stoughton Area	200	34	17.0%
9	Monona Grove	315	52	16.5%
10	Oshkosh Area	755	122	16.2%
11	Mukwonago	335	54	16.1%
12	Wauwatosa	527	83	15.7%
13	Sun Prairie Area	659	99	15.0%
14	Franklin Public	314	46	14.6%
15	La Crosse	553	81	14.6%
16	Kenosha	1,366	191	14.0%
17	Oconomowoc Area	383	52	13.6%
18	Wausau	620	84	13.5%
19	Menasha Joint	275	37	13.5%
20	Green Bay Area Public	1,466	196	13.4%
21	Hamilton	324	43	13.3%
22	Hortonville Area	294	39	13.3%
23	Beaver Dam Unified	231	30	13.0%
24	Pewaukee	203	26	12.8%
25	River Falls	230	29	12.6%
26	Janesville	756	95	12.6%
27	Tomah Area	225	28	12.4%
*	*Beloit Turner*	*106*	*8*	*7.5%*

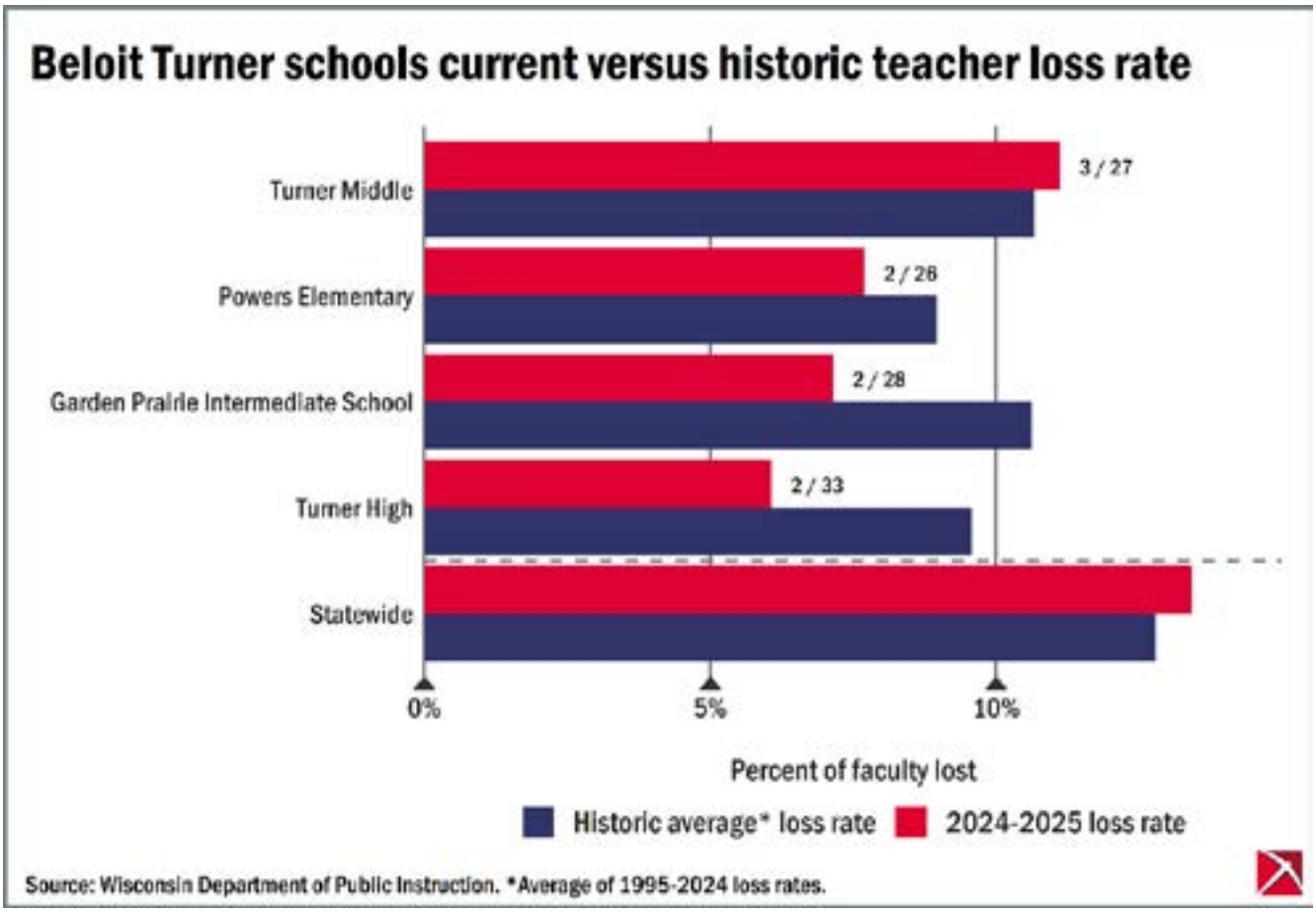
School-Level Loss

On a school-by-school basis, every traditional school in the Beloit district has a higher rate of teacher loss than its historic average level. The chart above shows the percentage of teachers that left Beloit schools, either by quitting teaching entirely or transferring to another district. (It does not count teachers who transferred from one Beloit institution to another.)

The bars in blue show the average loss rates from the beginning of the period through the 2023-24 school year for each school. The bars in red show the rates of loss between the most recent school years, 2023-24 to 2024-

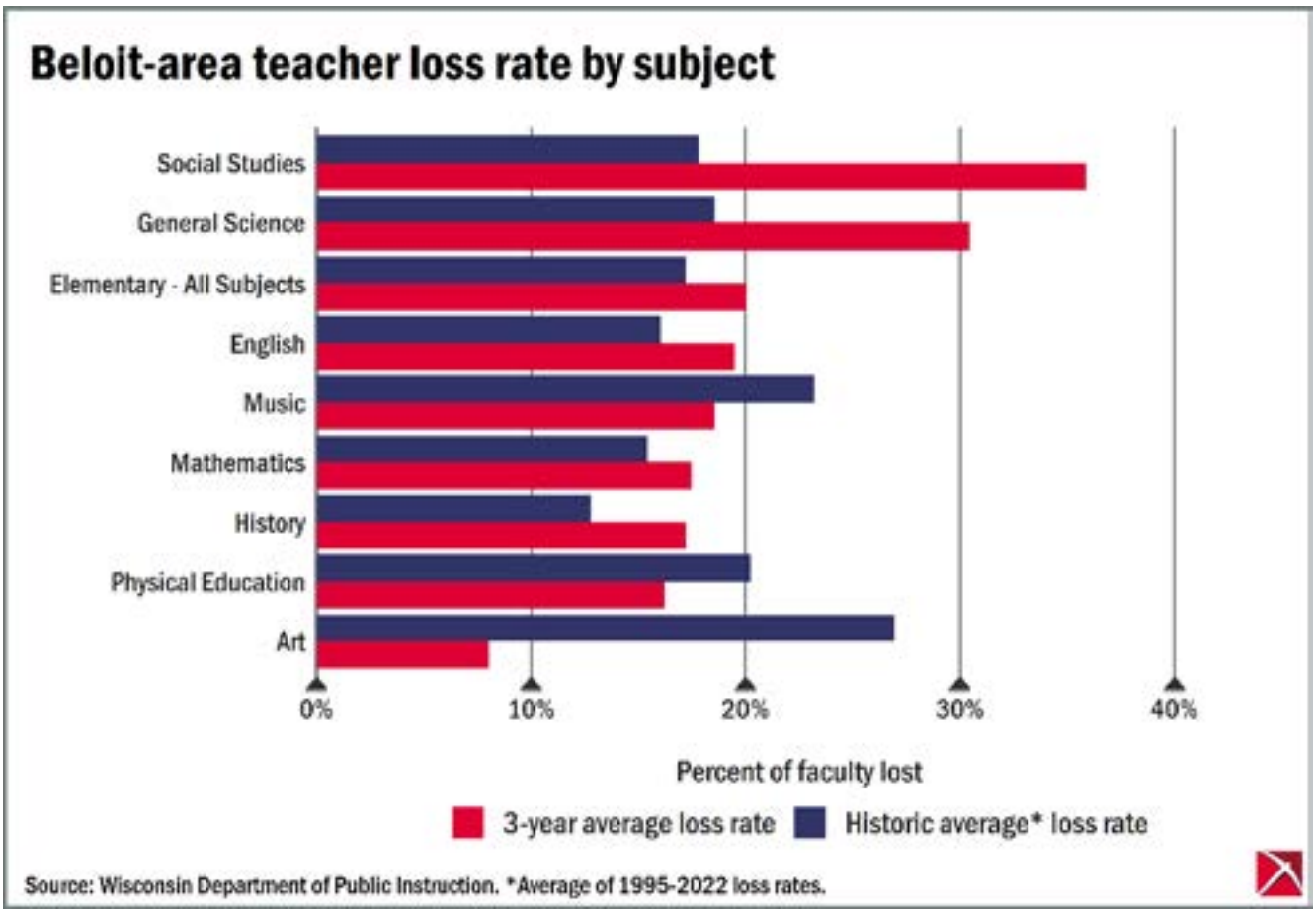


25. The annotations show the actual fraction of teachers who left. Fran Fruzen Intermediate school, for example, saw 16 of its 39 teachers exit or transfer out of Beloit between school years. Also included is a statewide average school-level teacher loss rate.



This chart shows the comparison between the most recent and the historic average loss rates for Turner schools. Again, a teacher is counted only if she or he left teaching entirely or left the Turner district; intradistrict moves are not counted. For the Turner district, all schools had lower loss rates than even the lowest traditional Beloit school, as well as being below the statewide average. For three out of four of the schools, recent loss rates were lower than that school's respective historic average.

Teacher Loss by Subject Area



The figure looks at teacher loss by subject area across all teachers in Beloit and Turner. Due to the smaller sample, averages were taken over the past three years and compared to the average of all years prior. Social studies, science, English, math and history have current teacher loss rates higher than the long-term average, while teachers of art, music, and physical education left at lower rates than their predecessors.

Conclusion

The School District of Beloit is struggling. Enrollment is declining at rapid rates, teachers are leaving the district at exceedingly high rates, and the problems are worsening over time. Many of the teachers are being replaced, but the level of churn is extremely high. In contrast, the Turner district, which is closely intertwined with the Beloit district, is small but steadily growing, and it maintains a steady workforce. Open enrollment data reveals that many Beloit families try to send their children to Turner schools instead. The information presented in this report only scratches the surface of the challenges facing Beloit, but it raises alarm bells that must be addressed.

The Badger Institute will dive deeper into the subject by conducting a study of current and former teachers from the Beloit area to learn about their first-hand experiences in the districts, where they originally came from, and why so many are leaving. Our future research will identify ways to increase teacher retention and attract new talent from the teacher preparation pipeline.

About the authors

Patrick McIlheran is executive editor at the Badger Institute. He previously served as policy director and provided reporting and commentary for the institute's weekly news platform. Prior to his public policy work at the institute, McIlheran served U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson for more than 10 years. Previously, he had a 14-year career with the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, including seven years as a columnist. Before that, he worked more than a decade as a journalist at newspapers in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Wyatt Eichholz is the Badger Institute's Policy and Legislative Associate. He graduated from the University of Alabama in 2024 with a Master of Arts in economics. Wyatt previously interned with the Badger Institute in 2022 and is an alumnus of the Heritage Foundation's Young Leaders Program. He has also interned for U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson and state Sen. Dale Kooyenga.