

**POLICY REPORT • MARCH 2026**

# **How to keep good teachers in the classroom**

**By Patrick McIlheran**



## This project

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# Wisconsin and its teacher staffing problem

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.

This brief is the conclusion of a series of Badger Institute publications examining the problem and potential policy responses.

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.

In a series of three briefs in 2025, we outlined the scope of the situation.

- 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 — both examining turnover rates in schools that formally adopted character education and interviewing educators at such schools.

Then 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.

Earlier this month, we looked at a sector of Wisconsin schools that the state's turnover data does not cover: independent charter schools and private schools. They face many of the same labor market pressures, but their responses offer lessons that may be applicable to traditional district schools.

Finally, we compile here some potential policy responses — drawing together a set of recommendations from interviews with former teachers and conversation with numerous administrators and other education leaders. This is where the listening leads, and it shows that Wisconsin can act to change its direction.

# How to keep good teachers in the classroom

Last of a Badger Institute series about teacher loss in Wisconsin schools and what policy makers and administrators can do about it.

Teachers who have fled a school or the profession altogether — and there are many of them in Wisconsin nowadays — often do so reluctantly and only after tremendous sacrifice and reflection.

“There’s a lot of days,” as a middle-school teacher with 11 years of experience put it, when “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?”

What *should* Wisconsin be doing?

No single silver bullet will relieve the problem of teacher loss. But there are several things, according to teachers themselves and some administrators, that need to change. We have distilled here a set of recommendations from interviews with former teachers, numerous administrators and other education leaders.

Wisconsin’s teacher shortage is primarily driven by a “crisis of retention” rather than a lack of new interest in the field. According to state data, teachers are more apt to leave their districts even as the rate at which teachers exit the profession remains steady, meaning the overall teacher turnover rate statewide has risen.

Nearly a tenth of teachers leave the state or the profession annually, and it’s about 13 percent for the newest teachers.

Wisconsin produces a steady stream of [new teachers](#), a significant portion of whom leave the profession or the state within their first few years.

Some of that is because of changing expectations in young Wisconsinites, away from an expectation of one job over the course of a career.

## Leadership

But from teachers’ own testimony, a large factor is inadequate leadership — on the superintendent and principal levels — in creating the kind of schools that educators want to work in. Instead, teachers tell of chaotic classrooms, rapidly shifting policies, and leaders who are afraid of children, afraid of confrontation, prone to breakdowns or given to management by hectoring. People quit bad bosses, and the leadership training pipeline is apparently not producing enough good bosses.

When teachers quit, moreover, weak management is slow to find replacements, meaning heavy workloads and ballooning class sizes due to the need for remaining staff to act as substitutes, filling in gaps by losing preparation time.

A growing issue in Wisconsin: Districts unwilling or unable to project, deploy and conserve funding for teacher staffing year to year. Too many districts expect increased state funding to cover additional staff hired during and after the pandemic, even in those districts with declining student populations. Such poor fiscal management at the level of district leadership is likely to increase teachers’ legitimate complaints.

**Recommendation 1: Provide better training for administrators at the pre-service level and, for existing principals**

## **and superintendents, in professional development programs.**

While Wisconsin districts often fund professional development for teachers, leadership training is typically left to individual administrators to pursue independently or through informal collaboration. Instead, coaching should be organized, deliberate and ongoing.

State professional organizations for administrators provide training funded in part by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, but such programs have not produced system-wide improvements. There are nationally recognized leadership development programs, but they do not appear to be used widely in Wisconsin.

Departing teachers frequently cited seemingly capricious policies, poorly explained changes, or inconsiderate management techniques. Upgrading administrators' management skills, at least sanding off the rough edges, could substantially improve teachers' daily lives.

Such training should especially include — if we are to take seriously [the voices of teachers who left high-turnover districts](#) — training for administrators in how to set workable, stable policies to curb disorder in schools. Departing teachers did not consistently complain that children were poorly behaved but rather that schools and district policies provided inadequate support and workable pathways for teachers in disciplining out-of-control or even violent students, and in maintaining order.

## **Recommendation 2: Wisconsin should start with a statewide legislative-sponsored gap analysis of development programs for principals and superintendents, evaluating their content, their coaching models, their effect on teacher retention and student outcomes.**

Are programs working and if so, can they be scaled? If they're not, why is the state continuing to fund them?

Existing programs should be benchmarked after nationally recognized programs from Harvard, Relay Graduate School, the National Institute for Excellence

in Teaching, and others. This needn't be costly: The state can reallocate federal and state leadership training money toward programs with proven outcomes.

Such nationally recognized programs are characterized by job-embedded coaching and data-driven school improvement, rather than by one-time training workshops. While state associations say they have coaching and all of the expected components of professional development, what they are doing clearly is not working.

## **Classroom disorder**

Departing teachers frequently cited classroom disorder.

Kimberly Desotell, head of the GRACE system of Catholic schools in Green Bay, noted that traditional Wisconsin teacher prep programs simply aren't succeeding at teaching classroom management, which she called "a defining factor if a teacher is going to be successful in year one."

This problem is readily acknowledged in research and policy efforts, yet teacher prep programs continue to be unwilling to adopt best practices and change their programs accordingly.

"The number one area that our brand new teachers struggle with is classroom management," so her system sets up its own coaching program to teach what the DPI-approved teacher prep curriculum did not.

"I think we could double down on classroom management techniques for our pre-service educators that make a world of difference in how successful they are in the first year of teaching," said Desotell.

## **Recommendation 3: Young teachers are particularly vulnerable to disorder in classrooms. Spend more time in teacher education programs on classroom management techniques.**

## **Recommendation 4: Student teachers are too often placed in classrooms in the second semester after veteran teachers have reined in unruly students and imposed some sense of order. Place students more frequently into**

**classrooms in the fall, a change that would give them more insight into how successful teachers are able to create functioning classrooms.**

Notably, a number of teachers observed that disorder in their schools became markedly worse at definable points in the past decade or two. Wisconsin should examine whether a widespread shift in policies or instructions from regulators to administrators is in retrospect associated with an increase in poorly controlled disorder.

## Character education

Another approach worth a second look would be explicit efforts to incorporate ethical values and moral formation into schools — the practice that in the public school sector is termed “character education.”

The [Badger Institute](#) examined whether a set of Wisconsin public schools and districts that instituted character education programs saw measurable effects on teacher retention. On their own, the data told a mixed tale, not a conclusive one, but school leaders said they saw evidence that helping students to 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,” as one program put it, is a means of attract and retain teaching talent. Teachers tell us they want to teach in schools where disruption is minimal, where students respect each other and them. Wisconsin should do all it can to encourage schools where values that lead to good and fulfilling lives are central. Character education, done the right way, can help accomplish that and keep good teachers engaged.

**Recommendation 5: Help teachers form good people, not just good students.**

## Certification of administrators

Worth asking: Do Wisconsin’s rigorous and expensive certification requirements, which apply to administrators as well as to teachers, impede the entry into the field of people with proven leadership capacities in other fields? Are administrator preparation programs and professional development taking full advantage of expertise in executive leadership training to develop school leaders? Additionally, in some districts, ideology and unproven

education programs, such as mindfulness and DEI modules, are required training that wastes time and human potential that could be spent on improving management techniques.

As one special education teacher who left his district said of the administrator who drove him out, “I don’t think she was too hot of a people person.”

That is a deficit that training can overcome.

The question of the state’s licensing and certification process is broader than administrators, however.

Successful educators working in Wisconsin’s rapidly growing independent school sector — public independent charter schools and private schools — are producing good results with students that call into question the value of Wisconsin’s certification requirements.

“Every single teacher that serves in the Milwaukee Public School District has to be certified,” said one leader in a network of independent schools, himself traditionally trained and certified. The district’s results are so poor, he said, “I have to wonder sometimes how valuable teacher certification actually is.”

Charter schools provide an illustrative example. Being public schools, they must use teachers certified by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction. State law provides for a charter certification or license. Kristi Cole, the chief education officer at The Lincoln Academy, says her school uses them but that there are snags:

“Let’s say you’re really, really good at math and you were a businessperson. You have a bachelor’s degree, maybe a master’s degree, and you want to teach.”

“You could take a Praxis test in math for whatever grade level you’re teaching, and you could pass it, and you could get granted a charter license for five years. Awesome.”

Her school employs some teachers who have used this pathway. But: “You could never get a traditional teacher license unless you go through all of the teacher programming, an extra two years of schooling to do that.”

“We have some of the best teachers who are second-

career teachers, who are incredible, gifted, talented people, and they can never get a traditional license unless they go back to college, and go through all of this two years of schooling, and then have to student teach after that ... even though they've been teaching for five years, maybe even 10 years."

What's more, she points out, if such an outstanding teacher shows administrative potential, she would need to get a traditional teaching license first, "and you had to have taught on that DPI license for at least three years before you can be an administrator."

This impedes one of the reasons for charter schools in the first place — not simply to provide a better education for students using them but to serve as examples.

"The whole point of charter schools was to be innovative labs," said Cole, "to be able to do things differently or to try different methods or models and be able to then take that and then transfer it to all schools and be able to share with them what we're doing because it's working." DPI certification rules that prevent charter school professionals from helping to supply needed talent in traditional district schools is, Cole said, a harm to children.

"Why aren't we looking at these schools and replicating what they're doing and working to try to make that change on behalf of our children?"

### **Recommendation 6: Give schools and districts more flexibility regarding certification.**

Cole and others cited the DPI's requirements for teachers with certifications from other states moving to Wisconsin, especially demands for additional college coursework before such professionals are licensed here. The agency contends it's flexible, "but if you talk to people that have come from other states to teach, that is absolutely the opposite story that you will hear," Cole said.

## **Teacher preparation programs**

Wisconsin does have a strikingly large number of teacher preparation programs — every University of Wisconsin campus, about 18 private colleges and universities, several nonprofit initiatives, skills upgrade programs from at least five of the state-

run Cooperative Education Service Agencies, and some technical college programs, such as Madison Area Technical College's collaborative effort with UW campuses. If school districts say they're still finding teachers hard to hire, it raises questions about effectiveness and duplication — areas ripe for outside audit.

### **Recommendation 7: Audit teacher preparation programs and identify both failures and best practices.**

The readiness of new teachers to manage a classroom raises questions about existing programs and whether the DPI's regulation of their content allows for more effective models of teacher preparation emerging in other states.

Some of it amounts to practicalities. Cole, for example, praised the idea of teacher apprenticeships as a path for people already serving as classroom aides, but the state's pilot program was offered only at a distant location. A four-year teacher prep program at a UW campus offered online access for some of her staff, she said, but only during the school day, when that staff was already performing its work in her school.

### **Recommendation 8: Encourage preparation programs that allow alternate classroom approaches to earning or completing certification.**

The DPI's rigid control of the content of teacher preparation programs also prevents, note some critics, the entry into Wisconsin of promising alternate approaches to teaching, such as the [Next Education Workforce model](#) developed at Arizona State University — one that involves teams of teachers working with larger groups of students. The model shows promise in other states where it has been tried, permitting both more individual instruction for students who need it and better utilization of the experience of senior teachers to improve the practice of newer educators.

The model even differentiates pay for teachers' differing levels of responsibility, rewarding seniority in a way directly linked to improved teaching — which leads to another recommendation.

## Meritocracy and pay

**Recommendation 9: Teachers are increasingly leaving one district for another. Money is often not the predominant factor, but it matters. In the competition between districts, successful schools establish a meritocracy that rewards talent. Let the market set the salary instead of the union — paying more to effective teachers, those with hard-to-replace certifications and those who teach kids better than the teacher in the next room.**

One frequently cited issue to note: the Act 10 labor reforms of 2011, which limited union control over many operations of school districts by limiting bargaining to pay. State data on teacher turnover back three decades shows [only a short spike](#) in teacher turnover the year after the reforms.

The subject of Act 10 came up infrequently in Badger Institute interviews with teachers who left high-turnover districts and usually only in passing or to note a reduction in what had been exceptional benefits levels. Several teachers mentioned it in the context of districts adapting to the new ability of in-demand teachers to bargain for higher pay than under the traditional step-and-lane system — an ability [borne out](#) in some [recent research](#).

Wisconsin is too slow to adopt differentiated compensation that, in effect, simply pays the best and brightest, most effective teachers more than their lower performing colleagues.

More broadly, the subject of pay came up as part of a holistic evaluation by teachers of the costs and benefits of remaining in a difficult situation: “When you start to see all the other problems pile up, the salary becomes a bigger deal,” as one teacher put it.

## Teacher licensing

The state could consider reforming teacher licensing — retaining background checks related to student safety, perhaps through the state’s usual occupational licensing agency, the Department of Safety and Professional Services, while restricting or ending the DPI’s ability to limit entry into teaching by alternative

paths and its control over teacher preparation programs.

“We’re always looking for high quality teachers, people who are interested in the profession,” said Cole, echoing what superintendents and district officials have said in other forums.

“Give us tools to be able to do that through flexibility in the educational programming and DPI licensure.”

## It isn’t fate

The problems underlying teacher turnover are many. Tug on the threads, and they lead back to school-level practices, how the state regulates education and, sometimes, to issues in society far beyond the schoolyard.

Wisconsin’s practices can change. Ways of preparing and regulating educators can be reformed. Teachers and administrators can be given proper preparation. Great teachers can be given the latitude to provide life-altering instruction and guidance.

Wisconsin is not fated to see a decline in the quality of education. Improvement is possible — and necessary.

### About the author



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