



# HELP WANTED

## Examining the teacher shortage in Wisconsin K-12 schools

*Joe Yeado*



Last August, a *New York Times* headline proclaimed “Teacher Shortages Spur a Nationwide Hiring Scramble.” The article detailed how school districts across the country “have gone from handing out pink slips to scrambling to hire teachers... a result of the layoffs of the recession years combined with an improving economy in which fewer people are training to be teachers.”

### **What about here in Wisconsin?**

Do our state and region face a shortage of teachers and, if so, what are the dimensions of the problem and what can we do about it?

Building upon our earlier analyses of teacher and school leader demographics and employment trends, we strive to better under-

stand how the teacher workforce has changed in recent years and how it is likely to change in the near future.

The educator profession in Wisconsin has been the subject of much discussion and debate in recent years, particularly during the consideration and implementation of Wisconsin Act 10. Consequently, our

analysis includes data over multiple years to capture changes in educator workforce numbers since 2009-10 and teacher preparation programs since 2008-09.

We hope the findings and conclusions of our analysis will provide insight for policymakers and the public and spark a much-needed

conversation about the future of the teaching workforce within the state and the region.

### How many teachers are in the workforce?

We begin our analysis of the educator pipeline by seeking to understand the current state of the teaching profession and how it has changed over time. Using data from the annual Department of Public Instruction's 'All Staff' files, we can quantify the number of teachers who have left the profession in recent years.

There were 59,837 classroom teachers working in public school districts throughout Wisconsin in the 2013-14 school year. Over the past five years, the number of teachers in the state has decreased by 1,478, or 2.4 percent. To provide context, the number of students enrolled in public schools in the state increased by 0.3 percent (2,269 students). While the number of public school students has remained relatively constant over time, we have fewer teachers in the state.

Looking at the workforce from an aggregate level obscures that some districts added teachers and some districts lost teachers over the time period. There is variation from



As a region and a state, there are fewer public school teachers in classrooms today than five years ago.

district to district, but as a region and a state, there are fewer public school teachers in classrooms today than five years ago.

### Age of teachers leaving the workforce

Among public school teachers throughout the state who left the profession in the most recent year, 11.8 percent were in their 20s, 21.9 percent were in their 30s, 14 percent were in their 40s, 6.4 percent were between the ages of 50 and 54, and 45.8 percent were 55 and older. The Wisconsin Retirement System (WRS) is the pension system for public employees, including teachers at public school districts. The minimum retirement age under WRS is 55 years old with reduced benefits, and age 65 with full benefits. For our analysis, we assume that

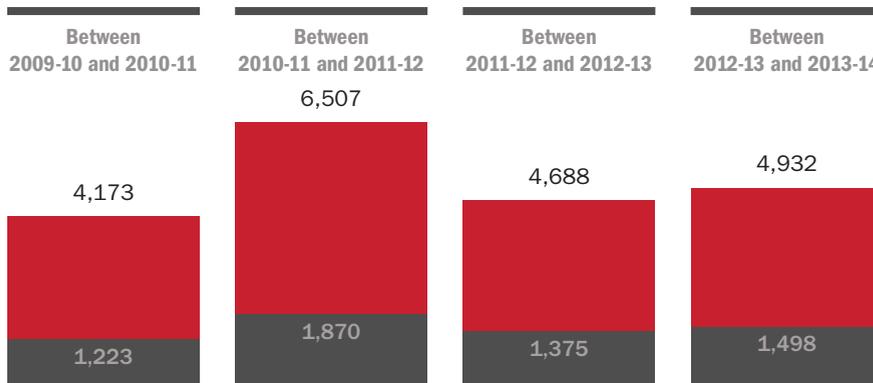
teachers age 55 and older who left the workforce have retired.

It is not surprising that retirement-eligible teachers make up the largest group of those leaving the workforce. The data also reveal, however, that in districts throughout Wisconsin, 54.1 percent of the teachers who leave are doing so prior to retirement. Young teachers in their 20s and 30s comprise nearly 34 percent of those who leave the profession. This finding suggests that public school districts in the state have difficulty retaining young teachers.

Young teachers in their 20s and 30s actually comprise a smaller percentage of those leaving in the most recent year as compared to 2009-10 (37.5 percent). While there has been a percentage decrease for this group over time, however,

## Number of Teachers Who Have Left the Workforce Between School Years

State of Wisconsin  
Metro Milwaukee





the actual number of teachers in their 20s and 30s leaving the profes-

sion has increased, further underscoring the need to address retention efforts.

### ■ Why are teachers leaving the profession?

Apart from retirement, teachers leave the profession for any number of reasons. This does not make the teaching profession necessarily different from any other kind of job. However, with the rise in teachers leaving the workforce in recent years, we wanted to know if there were common themes among those departing. Understanding some of the reasons why teachers leave the profession can help inform strategies and policies to improve teacher retention.

We conducted a survey of human resource officers at school districts throughout Metro Milwaukee to ask for the three most common reasons teachers give for leaving the workforce. While this is not a substitute for interviewing every teacher who leaves the profession, the high-level answers provide valuable insight.

**MONEY:** Survey respondents listed money as the most frequent reason teachers leave the profession. The average starting salary for a new teacher in Wisconsin ranges from the low \$30,000s to low \$40,000s, depending on the district. By comparison, the median starting salary for a new college graduate in 2014 was \$45,478.

**FAMILY:** The second-most frequent reason for leaving the profession is family. Survey respondents uniformly cited instances of teachers not returning to the workforce after having children. This finding should

perhaps prompt districts to consider policy changes that better accommodate the challenges of working parents.

**DEMANDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE JOB LEAD TO BURNOUT:** Many survey respondents listed changing demands and expectations of the job as a reason for leaving the profession. In recent years, teachers have encountered a number of structural changes to their job, including the adoption of new academic standards, new state assessment exams, accountability metrics, and performance-based compensation in some districts.

### ■ How many students are enrolled in teacher prep programs?

In 2013-14, there were 8,887 students preparing for their initial teacher license. About 69 percent of enrollments — 6,138 students —

MAKING THE GRADE

## DODGEVILLE SCHOOL DISTRICT

**"With the help of Miron's pre-referendum services, we were able to engage our communities in a conversation lasting several months. These professional efforts helped our community understand the needs we were facing and helped us learn more about the many perspectives and facets of our community. The process led by the Miron team certainly was a large part of our success."**

**Jeff Jacobson**

District Administrator, Dodgeville School District



**Building Excellence**

An equal opportunity, affirmative action employer.

MIRON-CONSTRUCTION.COM



## Percentage of Wisconsin Teachers Who Left Between School Years, by Age Group

	Between 2009-10 and 2010-11	Between 2010-11 and 2011-12	Between 2011-12 and 2012-13	Between 2012-13 and 2013-14
<b>Under 25</b>	2.3%	1.4%	1.6%	1.6%
<b>20s</b>	15.8%	10.8%	12.7%	11.8%
<b>30s</b>	21.7%	16.0%	21.6%	21.9%
<b>40s</b>	12.4%	8.9%	15.1%	14.0%
<b>50 to 54</b>	4.9%	3.9%	5.9%	6.4%
<b>55 and above</b>	45.6%	60.3%	44.6%	45.8%

were enrolled at a public university, while 2,749 students attended a private program. The vast majority of students — 95.5 percent — attended a traditional program that culminates in a bachelor's degree, while 402 students were enrolled in alternative, accelerated programs that help college graduates prepare for teacher licensure.

A casual look at the data shows the number of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs has declined sharply over the six-year period. Statewide, enrollment levels have fallen 27.9 percent, from 12,323 students in the 2008-09 school year. Public universities saw the biggest impact of the decline with enrollments falling 31.5 percent over the six years. Private colleges experienced a decline of 18.2 percent over the same period. Indeed, 28 of the 41 programs in the sample saw enrollments fall since 2008-09.

The number of students who complete teacher preparation programs in Wisconsin colleges and universities has also declined. Since 2008-09, the number of students completing teacher preparation programs statewide has decreased by 6.6 percent (266 students). Wisconsin's decline in completers is part of a larger national trend. Across the country, the number of teacher prep program completers is down 18.4 percent.

### ■ Teacher retention efforts

The question of how best to retain teachers deserves a longer and more detailed discussion than we can provide in this report. However, a few common themes arose from our research and conversations with teachers.

**COMMUNICATION:** It is important for school leaders to clearly express expectations and then work to provide the supports necessary to help teachers reach those standards.

and to place employees in roles that are mutually beneficial. Additionally, recognition is important, and publicly acknowledging good work can help foster a strong school culture.

**MENTORING:** Pairing teachers with a more experienced mentor can provide a number of benefits. Mentors help provide insight and guidance to hone the craft and create highly effective teachers. Mentors can be particularly valuable to new

## The number of students enrolled in teacher preparation programs has declined sharply over the six-year period.

This communication is especially important at a time when Wisconsin academic standards and state assessment exams are changing from one year to the next. Communication starts with teacher orientation and the on-boarding process, but it should continue throughout the year. Regular check-ins can provide teachers — and especially new teachers — with feedback that can help adjust and improve their efforts. These check-ins also can help school leaders understand the goals and desires of their teachers

teachers, but this practice should be available to more experienced teachers as well. Connecting groups of teachers through mentoring can help create a sense of teamwork as well as a support network for teachers. This support — from school leaders, mentors and colleagues — can help prevent teachers from feeling burnt out and leaving the profession.

**PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT:** Whether hosted at the school, or sending teachers to off-site



conferences, professional development opportunities allow for sharing and learning best practices. Off-site conferences and workshops can be particularly effective. Not only do they expose teachers to new topics, but they also signal that the school is investing in the staff member and cares about his or her development. Limited resources prevent schools and districts from sending all teachers to these events, but care should be taken to ensure access to professional development opportunities.

### Policy Options

In this section, we propose a set of policy options to ease teacher shortage and bolster the profession. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list, but rather to spur a

conversation on the future of the teaching profession in our state.

In addition, we acknowledge that several of these options would require additional public funding. Implementing these or other policy options may also require changes to the state funding formula to allow districts greater flexibility to raise and spend money, or may require a greater commitment of state resources. This undoubtedly will be a challenge given state and local budget constraints, but the scope of this problem may demand that funding obstacles be overcome.

**PROMISE PROGRAMS FOR TEACHER PREPARATION:** As our research has shown, enrollment levels in teacher preparation programs throughout Wisconsin have experienced a decline in recent years. A targeted scholarship initiative could incentivize students to enroll in and complete teacher preparation programs. Students participating in the

program would agree to enroll in and complete a teacher preparation program in Wisconsin. Upon graduation, these students would agree to work in a Wisconsin school for a set period of time, perhaps five years. In exchange, students would receive a grant to help pay for tuition and fees.

**TEACHER LOAN FORGIVENESS:** Student loans have become a near ubiquitous facet of attending college. For the class of 2014, 70 percent of Wisconsin students graduated with student loan debt, with an average debt amount of \$28,810. The federal and state governments have loan forgiveness program for graduates seeking teaching careers in public schools, however both of these programs have limitations. The existing Wisconsin Teacher Education Loan program provides a foundation to build on. Policymakers may consider increasing program funding to benefit greater numbers of students.

**STUDENT DEBT ASSISTANCE:** Under a debt assistance program, borrowers would receive a payment for each year they work in a school, with the payment amount increasing with each additional year of service. For example, a teacher may receive \$1,000 in debt assistance in their first year, \$1,500 in his or her second year, and so on.

**CHANGES TO SALARY STRUCTURE:** Finding ways to increase educator salaries may go a long way toward retaining current teachers and encouraging people to enter the profession. Some districts have altered their salary structures by introducing performance-based compensation. Under this model, teacher salaries are determined, in part, by evaluations, and those evaluations may be linked to increases or bonuses that allow take-home pay to exceed previous step levels.

**PART-TIME TEACHER EMPLOYMENT:** This could provide greater flexibility, particularly related to child care, while also keeping the teacher engaged in the classroom and school culture.

## Addressing Teacher Shortage in Wisconsin

**A**s part of an effort to get a better handle on teacher shortage, the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) has surveyed school districts to see how they have responded to shortages. The data gathered is being shared throughout the various CESAs. Together, with data still to be gathered from Wisconsin educators and teacher preparation programs, it will be used to develop a plan to address shortage issues.

Meanwhile, in Madison and elsewhere, legislators are actively discussing various approaches to the teacher shortage. Among the ideas being raised are:

- **Expansion of teacher loan forgiveness programs.** In the 2015-16 session, lawmakers created a rural teacher loan program by reallocating funding aimed at boosting the number of minority teachers; however, no new funding was provided. Efforts will be made to boost funding in the 2017-18 session.
- **Proposals to allow persons certified to provide instruction in Wisconsin technical colleges to teach high school students.** In the 2015-16 session, lawmakers approved allowing a permit to teach industrial arts subjects to be issued to an applicant who is certified to teach an industrial arts or similar subject in a technical college. Efforts may be made in the 2017-18 session to extend this approach to subject areas beyond industrial arts. □

## ■ Conclusion

Overall, we find that there is a shrinking supply of new teachers to replace a steady stream of existing teachers leaving the workforce. Moving forward, this dwindling supply will make it harder to replace each teacher vacancy. Specific research findings include the following:

- The number of teachers leaving the workforce has increased 22.5 percent in recent years.
- More than a quarter of the teaching workforce in Metro Milwaukee is over age 50, and as this group ages, departures are likely to become more numerous.
- According to local school district human resources professionals, aside from retirement, most teachers leave for money or family obligations.
- Enrollments in Wisconsin

teacher preparation programs are down 27.9 percent, from 12,323 students in 2008-09 to 8,887 students in 2013-14.

- Teacher prep program completers are down 6.6 percent in recent years — from 4,007 to 3,741 — and will likely continue to decline for the next several years.

Schools are an integral part of a healthy and vibrant community. Teachers, in turn, are an essential element of schools. The data and findings presented here paint a concerning picture about the teacher workforce in our region. Wisconsin faces a dwindling supply of teachers who will be in high demand from districts throughout the state and even from other states. This will make each future teacher vacancy harder to fill.

Armed with this information, we

encourage policymakers, school leaders, and the public to have an honest conversation about what the teaching profession should look like. Collaborative partnerships and focused attention can better support current teachers and encourage new teachers to ensure a steady and stable supply of educators for the schools and children in our state. ■

*Joe Yeado is a senior researcher with the Public Policy Forum.*

*This article was excerpted from the Public Policy Forum's report "Help Wanted: An analysis of the teacher pipeline in metro Milwaukee." Reprinted with permission from the Public Policy Forum.*

**Note:** The data used in this report primarily come from three sources: the 'All Staff' files compiled by the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction; Title II reports produced by the U.S. Department of Education; and institutional data on teacher preparation programs from a number of colleges and universities in Greater Milwaukee.



## WASB Business Honor Roll

**Has a local business been particularly helpful to your district this year?**  
Nominate them for the 2016 WASB Business Honor Roll!

Selected businesses and partnerships will be given statewide recognition and highlighted by the WASB.

To nominate a business, visit [WASB.org](http://WASB.org) (under Communication Services).  
Deadline: **Friday, August 19.**



WASB Business Honor Roll | 608-257-2622 | 877-705-4422 | Visit [wasb.org](http://wasb.org)