

Teacher attrition happens for a number of reasons, including lower pay, less administrative support, and worse environmental structures; increasingly, motives unrelated to pay are being used to explain attrition. When teachers leave to teach at another school (“Movers”) or leave the profession altogether (“Leavers”), schools are faced with costs that are tangible (replacing the teacher), intangible (disruption of classroom and school environment), and reflected in academic achievement of students. In rural schools, social and physical isolation play in as well. Because a large proportion of rural schools are small in population and physically isolated, teachers may work longer hours, fill more roles and positions, and interact with the community on a more regular basis than teachers in suburban and urban schools.

In this project, we seek to clarify whether or not Wisconsin’s rural schools experience greater or different challenges than similar schools in other locales in regard to teacher recruitment and retention. We analyze staff and school data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI) to look at a number of metrics, including salary, attrition and mobility rates, school characteristics, and age distributions of teachers across urban, suburban, town, and rural schools. We find that Wisconsin’s rural teachers are paid less, work in smaller and more isolated schools, leave at higher rates, and have less age concentration as a cohort in the middle of their careers compared to suburban teachers.

We then outline a number of newer policy interventions that show potential in combating attrition and increasing successful recruitment in rural places nationwide. The five interventions we discuss include principal and administrator training, marketing and school website improvement, targeted teacher incentives, university partnerships, and grow-your-own programs. Because these interventions are being tried in many forms throughout Wisconsin, we recommend that DPI look at data collection methods at the earliest possible stages of these interventions to test their impact and cost efficacy, and the state in general take seriously the educational challenges posed by an aging and declining rural population.