

Flash Brief

**TEACHER ATTRITION AND MOBILITY IN THE
PANDEMIC**

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Teacher Attrition and Mobility in the Pandemic

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WARNING: this brief contains the author's unmoderated opinions about controversial issues, which may cause dizziness, nausea, and/or seizures. Note that the views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of funders or the institutions to which the authors are affiliated.

Teacher attrition is squarely in the policy spotlight. Major news outlets such as *CNN*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *NPR*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* all have featured recent stories highlighting the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher shortages. All these news outlets point to teacher attrition as a primary culprit, using phrases like “mass exodus,” “in crisis,” and “Great Resignation” to describe the current state of affairs in the teacher labor market. All identify teacher burnout and attrition as a primary culprit in the staffing challenges that school districts are facing today. Below is a small sampling of their characterization of the situation:

“Burned out teachers are leaving the classroom for jobs in the private sector, where talent-hungry companies are hiring them—and often boosting their pay—to work in sales, software, healthcare and training, among other fields” (Dill, 2022).

“55% of [teachers] say they will leave teaching sooner than they had originally planned, according to a poll of its members by the nation's largest teachers union” (Kamenetz, 2022).

“The educator profession — a critical cornerstone of American life — is in crisis” (Maxouris & Zdanowicz, 2022).

“A mass exodus could worsen existing staff shortages in schools and cripple the education system in the U.S.” (Rahman, 2022):

“The coronavirus is vastly exacerbating that shortfall, experts say, by prompting many teachers to leave the profession or take early retirement” (Singer, 2021).

But the evidence of increased teacher attrition in these media reports is thin, as they cite anecdotes from specific former teachers or surveys about what current teachers say they *might* do in the future.¹ So, what do we know at this point about rates of teacher attrition during the pandemic? Contrary to the definitive takes from press reports, the existing large-scale, quantitative evidence suggests that teacher attrition after the *first year* of the pandemic (i.e., after the 2019–2020 school year) dropped relative to the preceding school years (e.g., Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2021).² This likely reflects teachers hunkering down after the 2019–2020 school year in the midst of the uncertainty of a pandemic (Ayaita & Sturmer, 2020; van Huizen & Alessie, 2019).

However, there are reasons to think that things could be different after the 2020–2021 school year and coming into this 2021–2022 school year. For example, surveys of teachers highlight the considerable challenges of teaching during the pandemic (e.g., Diliberti et al., 2021; Kraft et al., 2021), and as we show based on an analysis of the teacher labor market in Washington state, teacher attrition rates also tend to be inversely related to unemployment rates (Goldhaber & Theobald, 2021). The economy has continued to improve, labor markets are tight, and, arguably, there is less COVID-related economic uncertainty (Baker et al., 2020). All of this suggests that we should see teacher attrition increase coming into this school year.

¹ Note that recent evidence from data collected before the pandemic (Nguyen et al., 2022) finds that only about a third of teachers who report an intent to leave actually do leave their position at the end of the year.

² Note that stories about pandemic-related attrition that appeared last year also suggested that attrition had increased; for example, the *New York Times* article quoted above (Singer, 2021) was published in January 2021.

In this brief, we frame the magnitude of teacher attrition during the pandemic, including from the 2020–2021 school year to the 2021–22 school year, using publicly available data on the public teaching workforce in Washington.³ Specifically, we compare attrition rates during the pandemic to attrition during pre-pandemic years, spanning the 1984–1985 school year to the 2018–2019 school year. We also report the relationship between attrition rates and district vacancies and compare changes in teacher turnover rates to differences in these rates between different kinds of schools.

The stacked bar plots in Figure 1 show the proportion of teachers in different years who at the end of the year: (a) left their schools and the state’s public school workforce entirely (blue); (b) left their current teaching position for a non-teaching position (e.g., administration or instructional coach; green) within the state’s public school system; or (c) left their school for another public school teaching position in the state (red). The total teacher turnover rate (i.e., the sum of these three proportions) is shown at the top of each bar. Figure 1 shows four important points:

1. The attrition rate of teachers from the public school workforce after the 2020–2021 school year (7.3%, first set of bars) increased by almost one percentage point from the attrition rate after the 2019–2020 school year (6.4%, second set of bars).
2. Combined with the increased movement of teachers into non-teaching positions in public school districts (which increased from 2.0% after 2019–20 to 2.7% after 2020–2021), the percentage of teacher “leavers” as defined by federal reports increased by about 1.6 percentage points, which represents a nearly 20 percent increase in the proportion of teacher leavers compared to the first pandemic year.⁴
3. Rates of school-to-school mobility also increased by nearly a percentage point (to 7.8% from 6.9%), and the total teacher turnover rate (17.8%) was over one percentage point higher than in the average pre-pandemic year (16.7%, third set of bars).
4. The overall teacher turnover rate after the 2020–2021 school year is well within the range of turnover rates observed during pre-pandemic years (fourth and fifth sets of bars), and the rate of attrition from the workforce is the highest since the 2006–2007 school year.

Do these statistics support recent assertions of a “Great Resignation” or “Teacher Exodus” from public schools (Rahman, 2022)? These terms are, of course, in the eye of the beholder, but it is simultaneously true that: (a) teacher attrition in Washington increased substantially over the past year, resulting in hundreds of additional open teaching positions relative to previous school

³ This dataset, the S-275, can be downloaded at <https://www.k12.wa.us/safs-database-files>. These data include a snapshot of the state’s public school workforce (including teachers and other certificated personnel) from October 1 of each school year, and do not include data on late teacher hires or short-term substitute teachers. The state introduced new employment categories in 2021–2022 for teachers funded by federal special purpose aid related to the coronavirus pandemic (i.e., ESSER funds); we consider these as “teachers” for the purposes of this analysis, though we note that the funding of these positions may be temporary.

⁴ This uptick in attrition is roughly comparable to data that have been released from other states. For example, a report from South Carolina detailing year-to-year changes in teacher positions shows that district departures increased from 11.4% of the public teaching workforce after 2019–2020 to 12.6% after 2020–2021 (authors’ calculation based on CERRA, 2021). The comparable attrition rates in Washington (i.e., including district switchers as “leavers”) were 9.7% after 2019–2020 and 12.3% after 2020–2021.

years; and (b) even in the most recent year of the pandemic, these attrition rates are not inconsistent with what we've seen in past years.

The first point is important, as teacher attrition really does predict district staffing challenges. To show this in more concrete terms, we calculate teacher turnover rates by district and compare them to recently collected data from Goldhaber and Gratz (2021) on school district teacher vacancy rates in October 2021.⁵ We find that the relationship between district attrition rates after the 2020–2021 school year and the percentage of open teaching positions in the district in October 2021 is positive and statistically significant ($r = 0.23$, $t = 3.11$). In other words, districts that had more teachers leave the workforce after the 2020–2021 school year also had more difficulty hiring teachers by the start of the 2021–2022 school year.⁶ And there is no doubt that these staffing challenges are of concern given evidence that teachers hired late tend to be less effective (Papay & Kraft, 2016) and that staffing challenges have led schools to have to close (e.g., Velez, 2021).

But it is also important to keep this increase in teacher turnover in perspective. Not only are teacher turnover rates after the 2020–2021 school year lower than turnover rates from the mid-2000s, but the increase in these turnover rates is actually smaller than the average difference in turnover rates between high- and low-poverty schools in Washington state in a typical school year. For instance, the turnover rate in high-poverty schools (defined as the top quartile of the percentage of students in the school receiving free or reduced-priced lunch [FRL]) after the most recent pre-pandemic school year (2018–2019) was 19.0% compared to 13.6% in low-poverty (bottom quartile FRL) schools, a much larger difference than we observed in turnover rates between the two pandemic school years.⁷ Also, attrition rates from the public teaching workforce in Washington historically have tended to be higher for teachers in specific subject areas like special education (Theobald et al., 2021). Data are not yet available to explore whether this was true in the most recent school year as well, but this type of analysis will be important to gain a more nuanced picture about the nature of teacher attrition and could inform targeted solutions to address differential attrition if it exists.

In sum, our opinion is that many of the recent media stories about rising teacher attrition rates are accurate in direction but, arguably, not in magnitude. In particular, while there is clearly an uptick in attrition, we would not characterize the most recent attrition rates in Washington as a “mass exodus” of teachers. That does not mean we should be unconcerned; we agree with Will (2022) that we should take reports of teacher burnout and dissatisfaction seriously, even if they do not lead to attrition. But we also argue that some of the recent reporting on teacher attrition has mischaracterized the extent to which teacher attrition is driving staffing challenges and has not done enough to highlight some of the long-term issues of differential attrition by school poverty level or teacher subject areas. The lack of nuance in some media reports is problematic to the

⁵ Goldhaber and Gratz (2021) scraped district websites in Washington in October 2021 to provide a snapshot of district hiring challenges after the beginning of the 2021–2022 school year, including the number of open teaching positions, for 216 of the state's 295 school districts, which encompass about 98% of all students in the state. We correlate attrition rates with our calculations of teacher attrition in these same districts after the 2020–2021 school year.

⁶ The correlation between attrition rates and vacancy rates may have been higher if districts were not staffing up over a short run for COVID recovery efforts.

⁷ Specifically, rates of teacher attrition were 7.6% for high-poverty schools compared to 6.1% for low-poverty schools, rates of movement to non-teaching positions were 2.6% for high-poverty schools compared to 1.2% for low-poverty schools, and rates of school mobility were 8.9% for high-poverty schools compared to 6.3% for low-poverty schools. These rates all increased into the 2021–2022 school year, but less for high-poverty than low-poverty schools.

degree that policymakers react to these reports, rather than crafting solutions to more specific staffing challenges that have existed in the teacher labor market long before the pandemic.

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Figure 1. Selected teacher attrition and mobility rates in Washington, 1984–1985 through 2020–2021 school years

