

Flash Brief

**TEACHER TURNOVER THREE YEARS INTO
THE PANDEMIC ERA:
EVIDENCE FROM WASHINGTON STATE**

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Teacher Turnover Three Years into the Pandemic Era: Evidence from Washington State

Dan Goldhaber and Roddy Theobald

Three years into the COVID-19 pandemic era, concerns about teacher turnover and teacher shortages remain at the top of the education agenda. But contrary to media reports about a “wave of resignations and retirements” (e.g., Heller, 2021), early evidence from state databases showed a more nuanced picture: teacher attrition was actually down during the pandemic’s first year (teachers leaving after the 2019–2020 school year) before it increased somewhat in the next year (e.g., Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021, 2022; Bastian & Fuller, 2023; Camp et al., 2022; CERRA, 2022; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022a,b).

In this policy brief, we follow-up and expand on our earlier analyses of teacher mobility and attrition in Washington state with an additional year of data from the 2022-23 school year. We draw on a longitudinal database of school staffing in Washington, the S-275, which now provides 39 years of annual data on teachers and other school employees in the state. Three findings stand out:

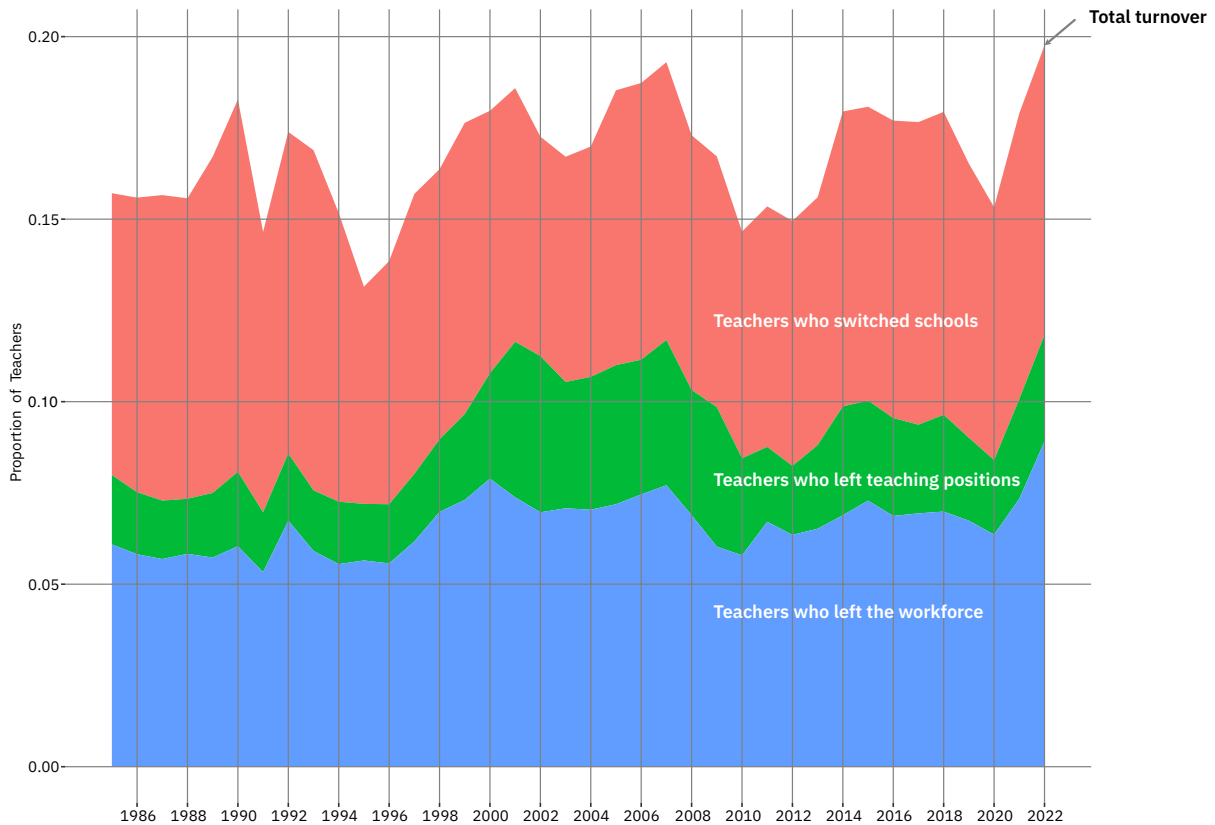
1. Teacher attrition and turnover are now at historic highs in Washington.

We begin in **Figure 1** by updating our prior analyses of teacher attrition and mobility. In the figure, the blue region represents rates of teacher attrition from the state’s public school teacher workforce entirely, the green region represents movement into non-teaching positions (e.g., coaching, or assistant principals), and the red region represents mobility of teachers between different schools (most of which is within-district mobility in Washington). The most recent attrition and mobility rates for 2022 are based on the share of teachers from fall of the 2021-22 school year (Fall 2021) who were no longer working in the system, moved into a non-teaching position, or switched schools in fall of the 2022-23 school year (Fall 2022).

The key takeaway from Figure 1 is that teacher attrition rates (blue region) and teacher turnover overall (all three regions) are now at historic highs. The teacher attrition rate in 2022 (8.91%) is over a percentage point higher than the attrition rate after any of the previous 37 school years. Likewise, the overall teacher turnover rate (19.76%) in 2022 is almost half a percentage point higher than the previous high covered by the data.

Figure 1. Teacher Turnover in Washington state is at a Historic High

Teacher attrition and mobility in Washington, 1984-85 through 2021-22

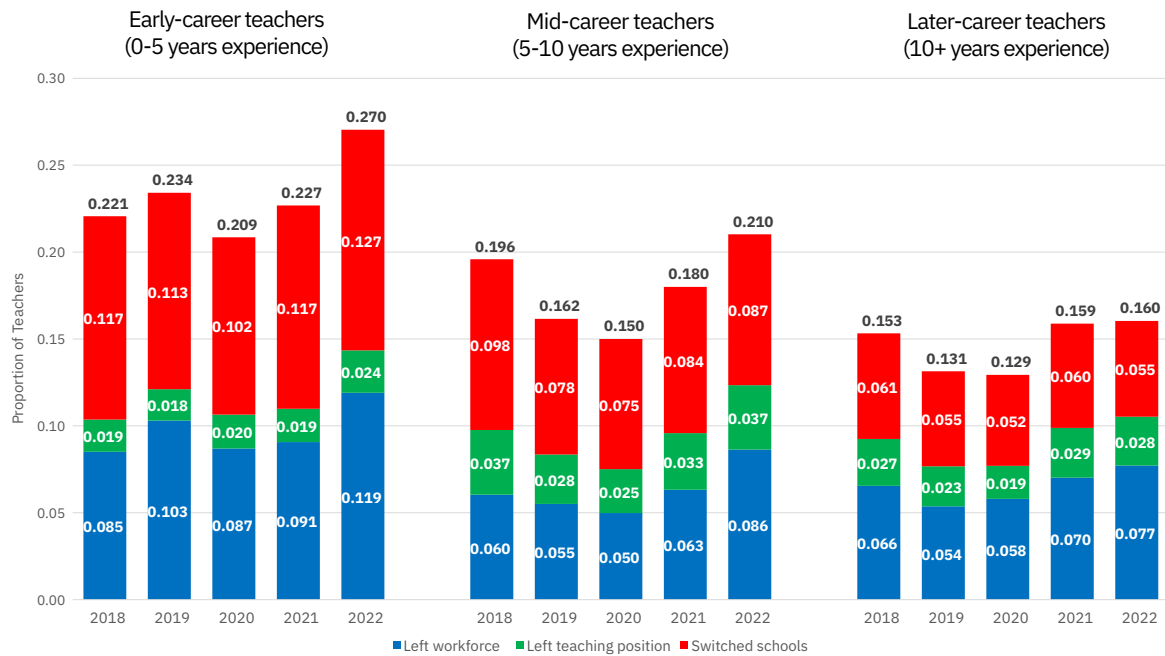


2. The increase in attrition is driven by early- and mid-career teachers.

We also find that not all teachers are equally likely to exit. **Figure 2** follows Bacher-Hicks et al. (2022) and shows teacher turnover rates separately for early-career (0-5 years experience), mid-career (5-10 years experience), and later-career (10+ years experience) teachers. The results show markedly different patterns in teacher turnover for each of the pandemic years (2020-2022) by teacher experience. In 2021, turnover was driven primarily by mid-career and later-career teachers. But by the third year of the pandemic (2022), we see a dramatic increase in teacher turnover for early-career teachers, while the rate for later-career teachers barely changed relative to 2021. Thus, recent increases in teacher turnover appear to be driven almost entirely by teachers with less than 10 years of experience.

Figure 2. Increased Attrition Is Driven by Early and Mid-Career Teachers

Teacher attrition and mobility by experience in Washington, 2017-18 through 2021-22

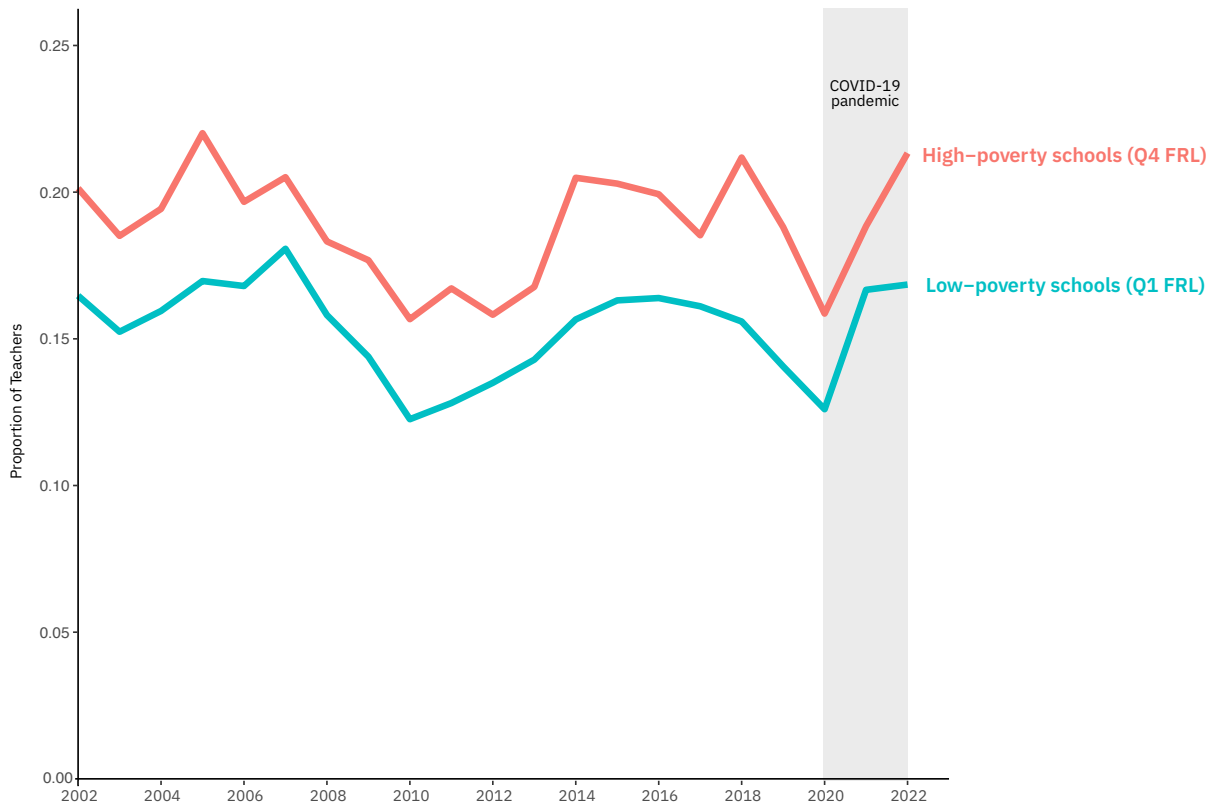


3. The increase in teacher turnover was concentrated in high-poverty schools.

Finally, **Figure 3** shows trends in teacher turnover by school poverty level. The lines in Figure 3 show the overall turnover rates in high- and low-poverty schools, as measured by the share of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch. High-poverty schools are in the top quartile of the distribution of the percent of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch, while low-poverty schools represent the bottom quartile of the distribution.

In line with prior research, teacher turnover rates are higher in high-poverty schools across *all years in the data* compared to low-poverty schools. But the turnover gap widened considerably after the third pandemic year, growing from a 2.17 percentage point difference after 2021 to a 4.48 percentage point difference after 2022. To put that in perspective, the percentage point gap between high-poverty schools and low-poverty schools was equivalent to the increase in teacher turnover statewide that happened during the pandemic.

Figure 3. Increased Attrition Is Concentrated in High Poverty Schools
 Teacher turnover by school FRL % in Washington, 2001-02 through 2021-22



Are the data and rhetoric converging?

Up until this point of the pandemic, empirical evidence about teacher turnover has not matched the crisis rhetoric about the teaching profession (Maxouris & Zdanowicz, 2022). But the latest year of data from Washington shows that, consistent with recent survey research that reports increasing turnover rates nationwide (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2023), the situation is changing. In Washington, teacher attrition and turnover rates are at historic highs, and the state is disproportionately losing early-career teachers and teachers from high-poverty schools.

When interpreting these results, it is important to keep in mind that even seemingly small increases in attrition can have important implications for the state. The 1.6 percentage point increase in teacher attrition between 2021 and 2022, for example, meant that the state’s districts needed to hire over 1000 more teachers last fall (2022-23) than they did the prior year (2021-22) to maintain prior staffing levels. This is a huge increase in a state that typically trains around 3000 new teachers each year (Title II, 2023).

The bottom line is that, when compared with historical data and other evidence about teacher shortages in specific schools and subjects (e.g., Goldhaber et al., 2022), the teacher turnover rates that we observed this year bring the data more in line with the teacher labor market crisis rhetoric that has been used since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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