

Profile of Wisconsin Teachers (2000-2020)

The goal of this brief is to present a descriptive profile of key attributes of Wisconsin’s teacher labor force. 20 years of data are included (between 1999-00 and 2020-21 school years) in this summary, including numbers of teachers, *what* they teach, *where* they teach, and selected demographic characteristics (including gender, race/ethnicity, age, and years of experience). For a detailed report of these finding, [click here](#). Three specific questions are addressed in this brief include:

- Question 1** How has the number of teaching staff in Wisconsin public schools changed over the past two decades, and how does this compare to trends in student enrollment?
- Question 2** How has the distribution of Wisconsin teachers across area of teaching assignment, geographic locale type (including the state’s largest districts), and region of the state changed over the past two decades?
- Question 3** How have selected characteristics of Wisconsin’s teaching force (gender, race/ethnicity, age, years of experience, and highest degree held) changed over time?

Numbers of Teachers

In 2020-21, Wisconsin public schools collectively employed a total of 60,574 staff whose primary assignment was teaching. This figure represented an increase of 1357 teachers (+2.3%) from 21 years earlier (1999-00). During the time frame analyzed, the number of teachers in Wisconsin has fluctuated from year to year, from a high of 61,814 in 2002-03 to a low of 58,333 in 2011-12 (the first year following the passage of Wisconsin’s controversial Act 10). The number of students enrolled in Wisconsin public schools in grades PK-12 over this same 20-year timeframe decreased by 47,413 (-5.4%), most of this decline occurred between 2014-15 and 2020-21. These figures produce an unofficial statewide student-teacher ratio ranging from 14.9 to 13.7 (with decreasing student-teacher ratios observed since 2015-16).

What They Teach

As of 2020-21, Elementary teachers were the most numerous (approximately one-third) of Wisconsin teachers, followed (in descending order) by Special Education and English Language Arts teachers. Although Elementary teachers remained the most numerous in the years studied for this evaluation, counts of this type of teacher have decreased. While Elementary teachers remain the most numerous assignment type, there were 1300 fewer Elementary teachers in 2020-21 compared to 1999-00 (a 6.1% decrease), whereas the number of Special Education teachers increased by approximately 1800 (+23.0%). Large percentage increases over the past 21 years were also observed for Math (+26.4%) and English as a Second Language teachers (+100.2%), while large percentage decreases are seen for Family and Consumer Education (-31.4%) and Health teachers (-25.4%).



Where They Teach

When categorizing Wisconsin public school teachers using the locale codes of *city*, *suburban*, *town*, or *rural* (as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics), the following trends were observed in

the number of teachers: a small decrease for City schools, a relatively large increase for Suburban schools, and moderate increases for Town and Rural schools. These changes were primarily seen between 2013 to 2021. In 2020-21, Wisconsin’s five largest districts (Milwaukee, Madison, Kenosha, Green Bay, and Racine) collectively contained nearly 15% of all public schools in Wisconsin and nearly 20% of statewide student enrollment. Three of these five largest districts had increases in teachers, but the collective increase among these districts was overshadowed by a 1500+ decrease in teachers in Milwaukee, the state’s largest district. Accordingly, the statewide “market share” of employed teachers by the five largest districts together declined from 20.2% to 18.0% during the time frame examined. Using Wisconsin’s 12 Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) regions to explore the distribution of teachers, the more heavily populated southeastern (CESA 1) and south-central (CESA 2) regions of the state combined contain nearly half of the state’s teachers. 7 of the 12 CESAs had fewer teachers in 2020-21 compared to 1999-00 (CESAs 1, 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, & 12). In general, the more rural areas of the state (CESAs 3, 5, 8, 9, and 12) saw the biggest declines in teachers, both in absolute terms as well in percentages.

Teacher Demographics

The average age of Wisconsin public school teachers has remained stable over the past two decades (age 42.2-43.3), with a notably sharp one-year decline from 43.3 in 2010-11 to 42.6 in 2011-12 (after the passage of Act 10 and the subsequent retirement of relatively large numbers of teachers statewide). Average years of both total and local (same district) teaching experience fluctuated during the time frame examined, with one-year declines on both measures evident from 2010-11 to 2011-12. Wisconsin’s teaching corps is predominantly female (75.0% in 2020-21) and has remained overwhelmingly (more than 95%) white in recent years, which is not a reflection of the increasing levels of diversity among public school students statewide. Black and Hispanic/Latinx teachers are particularly under-represented in relation to each group’s share of public school enrollment statewide, comprising just 2.0% and 2.2% of the state’s teachers in 2020-21 respectively, compared to 8.9% and 12.8% of the state’s public school enrollment, respectively.

The distribution of total teaching experience by categories (first year, 2-5 years, etc.) in 2020-21 shows that a relatively small share (4.4%) of all teachers statewide are in their first year of teaching, while the largest share (nearly one-third) has 20 or more years of experience. Two interesting trends in teachers’ experience level were evident over the past 20 years: first, a steady increase in teachers with master’s degrees from 1999-00 through 2010-11; and second, a relatively sharp decrease in the percentage of teachers with master’s degrees after 2015-16, with bachelor’s-holders becoming the modal level of educational attainment once again. This trend may be attributable, in part, to increasing numbers of Wisconsin districts either condensing or replacing the traditional “step and lane” salary schedules that had been the norm for many years.

Distribution of Total Teaching Experience, 2020-21



This policy brief, produced by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison as part of the Region 10 Comprehensive Center, is one in a series examining selected topics related to Wisconsin’s educator workforce.