

Schools Struggle With Teacher Turnover

Quitting is still higher than before the pandemic, new state data show

By MATT BARNUM

Betsy Sumner always knew she wanted to be a teacher. She came from a family of educators and took a class in high school for aspiring teachers. She began teaching straight out of college in 2009 and loved it.

But last summer she left her job teaching family and consumer sciences, the subject previously known as home economics, at a high school in northern Virginia. With four children of her own, juggling the demanding workload was no longer worth it for the pay.

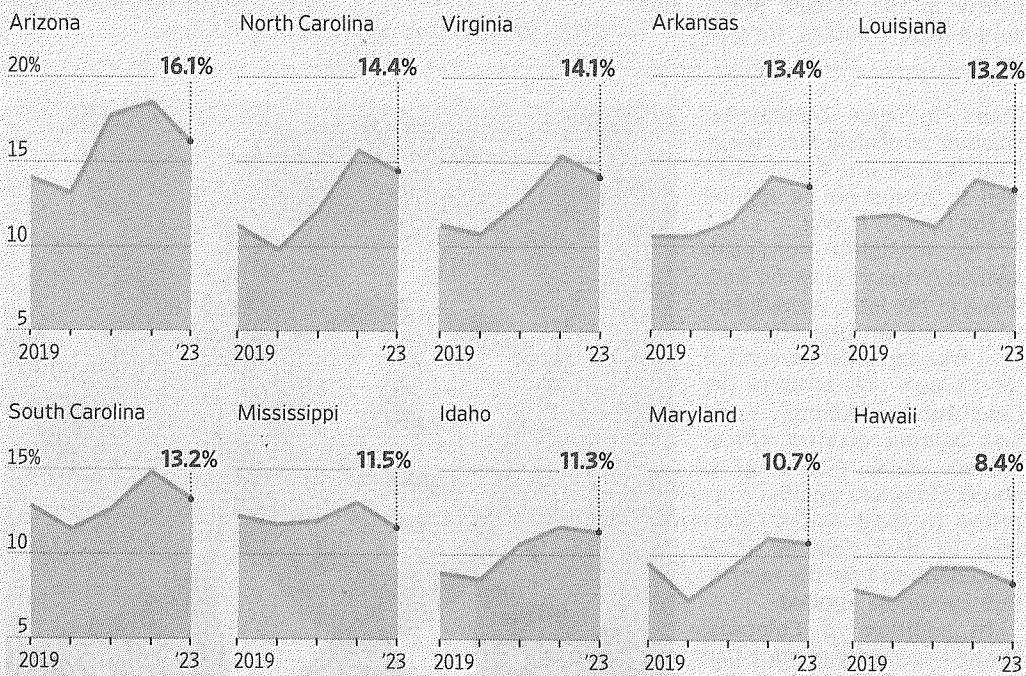
"It's almost like preparing for a circus or a theater performance—every day you have to show up and do a show," she said of preparing for class each day. "It's just not really sustainable."

Public-school teachers like Sumner are still leaving the profession in higher numbers than before the pandemic, a Wall Street Journal analysis of data from 10 states show, though departures have fallen since their peak in 2022. The elevated rate is likely due to a combination of factors and adds one more challenge to schools battling learning loss and frequent student absences.

"This is still a discouraging story," said Katharine Strunk, dean of the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. "I don't think this level of consistent attrition is sustainable for the school system."

National teacher exit data

Teacher turnover for select states



Note: Turnover definition differs by state
Sources: State departments of education (Ariz., Hawaii, La., Md., Miss., Va.); Idaho State Board of Education; Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement (S.C.); University of Arkansas; University of North Carolina

is released only sporadically, and many states don't produce timely figures. But the Journal obtained information from 10 states, the most comprehensive recent compilation, that shows turnover typically followed a postpandemic pattern: a drop in the summer of 2020, followed by a surge in 2022.

In all 10 states, attrition fell last fall, as the current school year began. But in nine states, turnover still remained higher than in 2019.

In some places, including Hawaii and South Carolina, the increase in churn was small. But in other states—such as Arkansas, North Carolina and Virginia—teachers were leaving in substantially higher numbers than they were prepandemic. Turnover

rates typically refer to the share of teachers no longer teaching in the state's public schools, although the precise definition varies.

In Virginia, turnover before the pandemic was consistently lower than 12%. The recent rate was 14.1%, amounting to a loss of nearly 2,500 more teachers. Teacher vacancy rates in the state hit 4.5% this school year, the highest since at least 2015.

Researchers have linked loss of teachers to lower student test scores.

Experts and educators say teachers are continuing to leave for a variety of reasons. The average teacher salary—around \$66,000—hasn't risen significantly in decades, adjusted for inflation, as officials have used increased education

funding for other purposes. Occupations outside of teaching may be more available and enticing with unemployment rates low and work-from-home policies more common. And some teachers say that student behavior has worsened since the pandemic.

Limited support from administrators with student behavior pushed Ryan Higgins to leave his job teaching world geography in the Dallas-Fort Worth area in 2022. "I was a ninth-grade teacher and my students were seventh-graders emotionally," he said. That year, the most recent with data available, Texas experienced its highest rate of teacher turnover in at least a decade.

Some former teachers cite political battles over issues

such as how race and gender are discussed in class and the feeling that the profession has lost respect.

Aimee Heavener, who like Sumner taught high school in Loudoun County, Va., said that was one of the reasons she left teaching in 2022. "I do think that teachers became demonized in some ways and mistrusted," she said.

Lisa Coons, Virginia's superintendent of public instruction, said she recently formed a teacher advisory council to incorporate teachers' perspective into state policy. "Part of the reason that our teachers are telling us they feel demonized is because they're not feeling heard," she said.

School leaders say they face the dual challenge of losing teachers and struggling to recruit new ones.

"The candidate pool is not there in Virginia and nationwide right now," said Paul Pack, an elementary school principal in Loudoun County. His school couldn't find teachers for two openings this year, which meant larger classes for other teachers in the school.

In Guilford County, N.C., superintendent Whitney Oakley said that the district, like many, has long had a tough time finding math, science and special-education teachers. Now elementary-school educators are scarce, too.

"There used to be a line out the door of elementary teachers," she said. "That is no longer the case."

In coming years, pressures to recruit teachers could ease, but for an unwelcome reason: Educators and researchers expect that the depletion of federal pandemic relief funds will force schools to limit hiring.