



# RESEARCH SUMMARY

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## TURNOVER AMONG ALASKA'S TEACHERS: HOW MANY LEAVE THEIR JOBS?

By Diane Hirshberg and Alexandra Hill

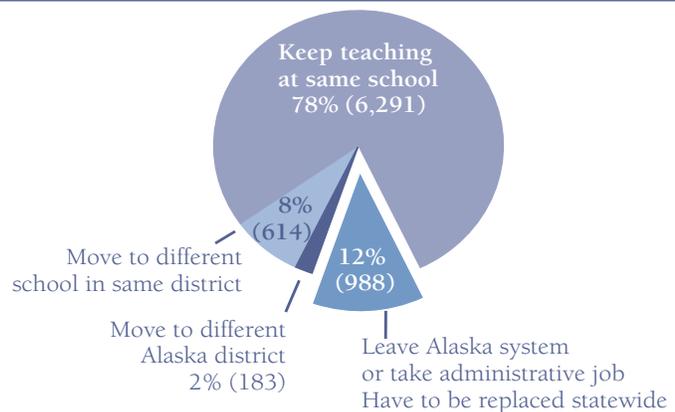
Despite what many people think, there is no general shortage of teachers, nationwide or in Alaska. But school districts in Alaska and around the country do have problems recruiting and keeping teachers; the geographic distribution of teachers doesn't always match the demand; and there are shortages in some specific fields—special education, for example.

Teacher turnover in Alaska has been relatively constant over the last decade, requiring some districts in the state to recruit heavily every year. ISER recently looked at the demand for and the supply of teachers in Alaska; see the back page for the full report citation. Highlights of our findings include:

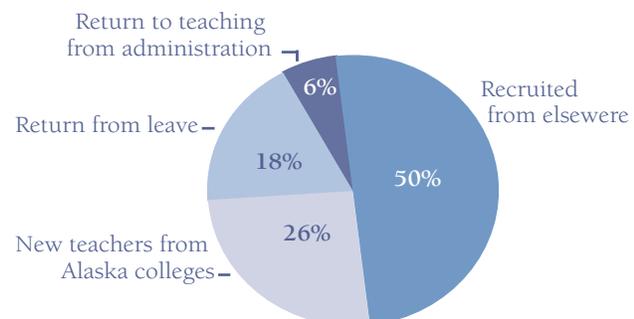
- Close to 1,000 teachers—or 12% of the state's roughly 8,100 teachers—have to be replaced every year. These are teachers who either leave the Alaska public school system or take administrative jobs.
- High turnover and small capacity for training teachers in Alaska mean that only about one-quarter of the replacement teachers are new graduates of colleges and universities in Alaska. Another one-quarter either come back from leave or return to teaching from administrative jobs. The remaining half are recruited from elsewhere.
- Teacher turnover is higher at the district level than it is statewide, because in addition to teachers who leave the Alaska system every year, another 2% change districts within Alaska. So average annual teacher turnover among districts is about 14%.
- Turnover is a much bigger problem for rural than for urban districts. As a group, Alaska's five largest districts—the ones we classify as "urban"—have about 11% teacher turnover a year, compared with 24% among rural districts.
- Many of Alaska's rural districts magnify problems that contribute to teacher turnover nationwide—including remoteness, small enrollment, high rates of poverty, and high needs and low achievement among students.
- Statewide enrollment and teacher demand are expected to remain about at current levels through 2010 and then grow modestly. But enrollment in some districts—especially the Mat-Su—is growing.

- About a third of Alaska's teachers and administrators will be eligible to retire between now and 2010. We know that many don't retire as soon as they can—but some school officials worry that if a large share of those eligible to retire do in fact retire, turnover could increase.
- Training more Alaskans to teach has been suggested as a way to reduce turnover, and there is evidence that might help. Our analysis of data from the most recent school year found that Alaska-born teachers were only half as likely to leave the school system as teachers born elsewhere.
- Salaries for Alaska teachers remain above the U.S. average, but they're less competitive than they used to be. We don't know how recent changes in retirement systems, teacher training requirements, and licensing policies will affect Alaska's ability to attract teachers.

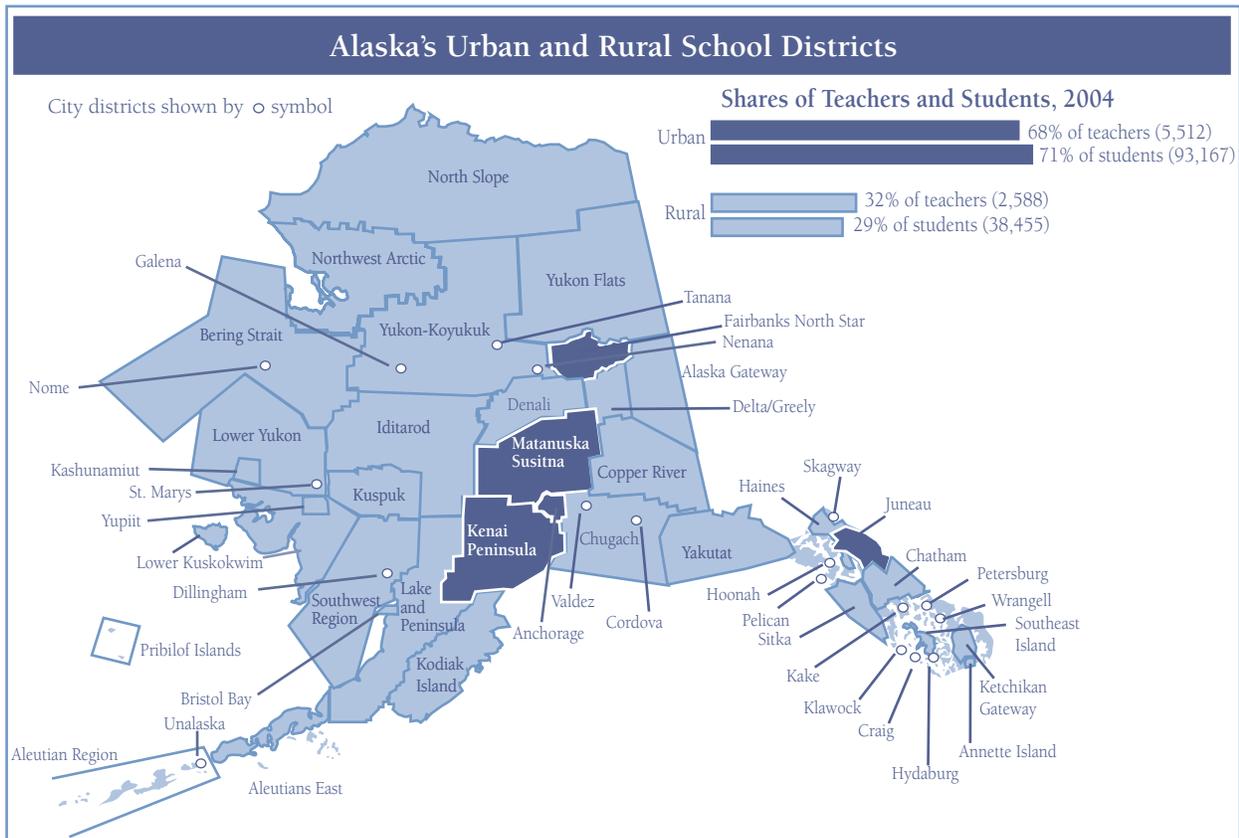
### What Is Alaska Teacher Turnover Statewide? (Average 8,076 Teachers, 2000 - 2004)



#### Where do replacements come from?



Sources: Alaska Department of Education and Early Development database; projections of teacher graduates from Alaska colleges and universities; ISER analysis



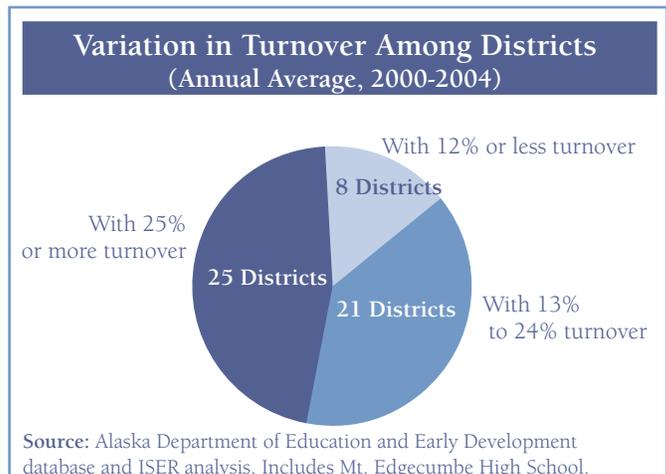
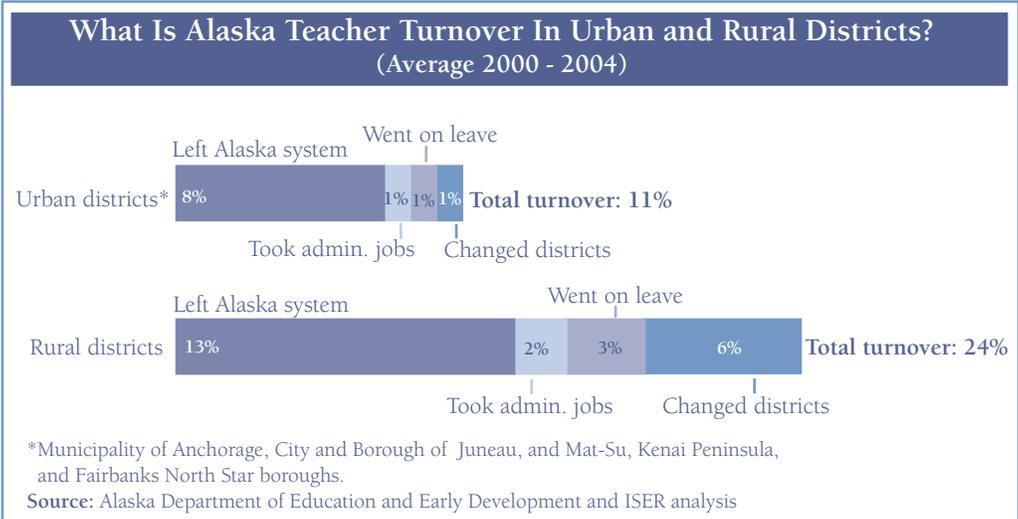
### WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Turnover worries school districts and parents because it has been linked with lower student achievement. Turnover can leave already low-achieving schools with the least qualified, least experienced teachers.<sup>1</sup> It also costs money that might otherwise go to instruction. One analysis estimated that filling teacher vacancies cost districts in Alaska more than \$18 million in 2000.<sup>2</sup>

### WHY DO TEACHERS LEAVE?

Teachers nationwide most commonly cite a variety of “personal reasons” for leaving their jobs, but many also cite inadequate salaries or administrative support and problems with student discipline. In Alaska, other factors also contribute to teacher turnover, especially in remote rural districts. Many rural communities are accessible only by air or water, making travel more expensive and difficult. Some places still lack public water and sewer systems, and good housing is often hard to find. Local health care in remote areas is quite limited.

Teachers in very small schools must often teach several subjects across grade levels. Also, many small remote places are Alaska Native villages with their own languages and cultural practices. It can be difficult for non-Native teachers to learn how to teach effectively in communities with different cultures.



## URBAN AND RURAL TURNOVER

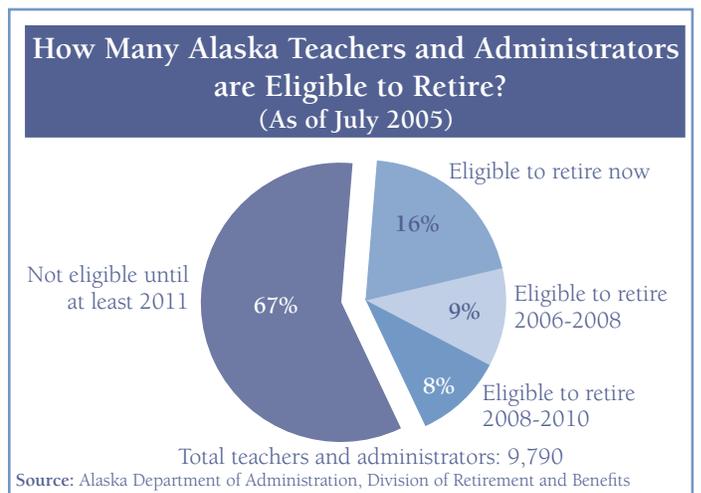
We define “urban” districts as those in Anchorage, Juneau, and the Fairbanks North Star, Mat-Su, and Kenai Peninsula boroughs. More than 70% of students and 68% of teachers are in those five districts. The remaining 48 districts are defined as rural, as the adjacent map shows.

Turnover in rural districts is more than double that in urban districts. Rural teachers are far more likely to leave the Alaska school system, to change districts within Alaska, and to go on leave. But turnover also varies a great deal among rural districts. A few have turnover at the same level as the urban districts—12% or less. Other rural districts are split almost evenly between those with annual turnover of 13% to 24% and those with turnover of 25% or more.

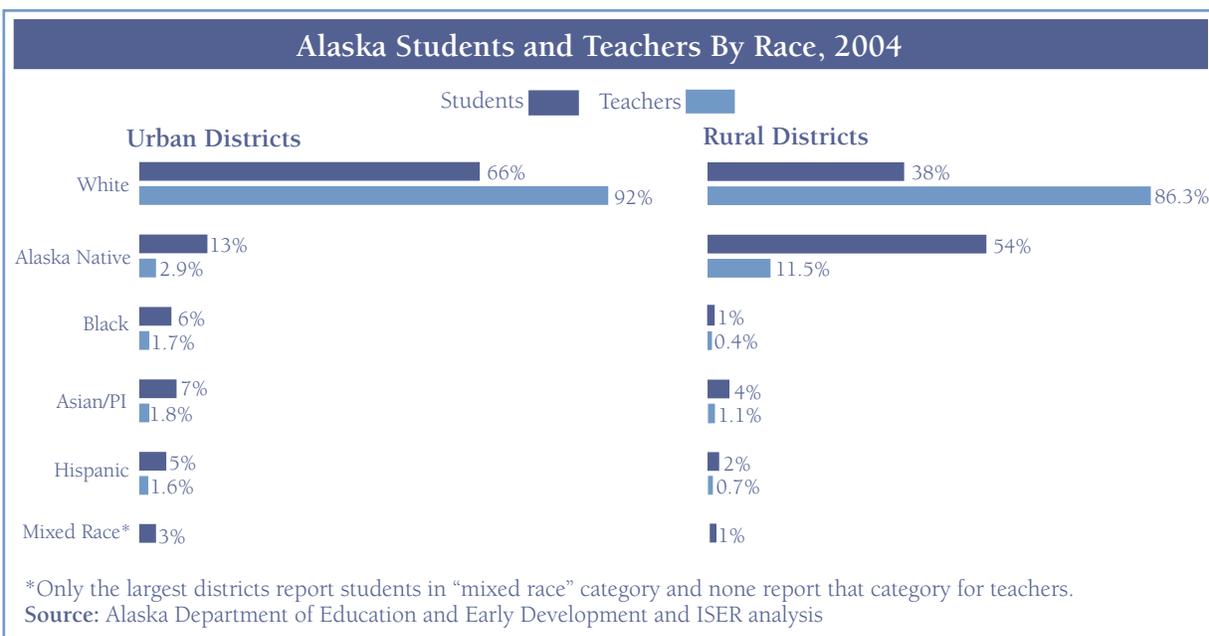
## TEACHERS’ CHARACTERISTICS

Alaska’s teaching force remains overwhelmingly white, even as the student population grows more diverse. All minorities are under-represented among teachers, but in rural districts the gap is especially wide between the share of Alaska Native teachers—12%—and the share of Native students—54%. The share of Alaska Native teachers hasn’t increased much in recent years, despite programs to train more Native teachers.

Alaska’s teachers are also aging. About a third of the state’s roughly 9,800 teachers and administrators are eligible to retire by 2010. The available data don’t allow us to separate teachers from administrators, nor can we predict how many of those eligible to retire will actually leave the school system in the next few years. Still, a large number of retirements in a short period would increase turnover.



Most of Alaska’s teachers come from outside the state, and the distance from family and other factors often make it hard for them to stay—especially in remote places where travel in and out is expensive. Some analysts believe turnover would be lower, if there were more Alaska-born teachers. Our analysis of just one year’s data suggests that may be true—but we would need more data to draw a firm conclusion.



## PROJECTED GROWTH

The adjacent graph shows that Alaska public school enrollment is expected to remain almost flat at around 142,000 in the next several years and then grow about 10% by 2024. So the number of teachers Alaska needs will likely not increase much in the next few years—although growing districts will need to add teachers. Demand for teachers will gradually increase from about 8,100 now to around 9,100 by 2024.

## ALASKA GRADUATES

Current teacher education programs at Alaska's colleges and universities can fill only a share of the demand for teachers created by turnover and growing enrollment.

Alaska has five teacher education institutions—the three main campuses of the University of Alaska (Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Southeast), and Sheldon Jackson College in Sitka and Alaska Pacific University in Anchorage. Those institutions together project they can build from a low of 158 graduates in 2004 to 286 by 2009.

## ALASKA COMPETITIVENESS

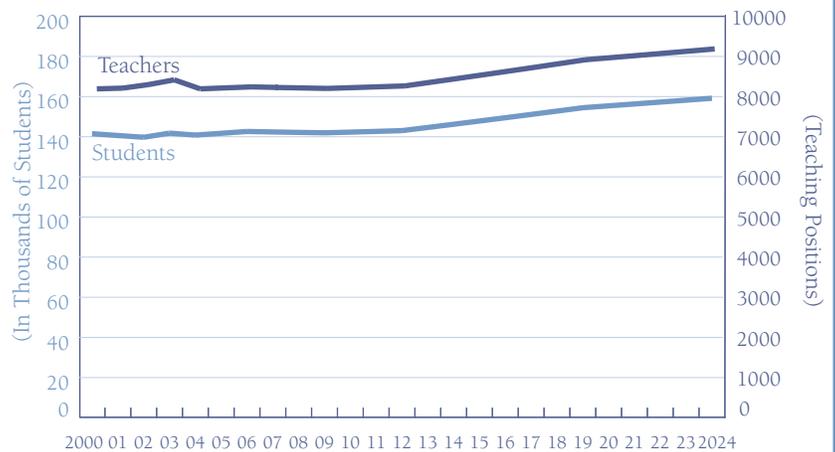
Higher living costs, especially in remote areas, have historically made Alaska teachers' salaries higher than the U.S. average, and salaries here still rank number 11 in the U.S. But from 1994 to 2004, teachers' salaries in Alaska grew less than in any other state—under 9%, compared with 31% nationwide. Adjusted for inflation, Alaska teachers' salaries fell 14% during the decade. So on the basis of salary, Alaska has become less competitive nationally in the search for qualified teachers.

## REDUCING TURNOVER

We weren't asked to recommend policies for reducing teacher turnover but rather to provide information for policymakers. We can, however, make some general observations.

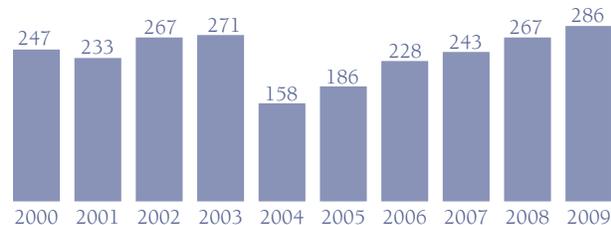
Alaska institutions can't train all the nearly 1,000 replacement teachers Alaska needs every year—but with the necessary resources they could train more than they currently do. Policymakers also need to assess how much the real decline in Alaska teachers' salaries and the recent changes in retirement systems and licensing and training policies may contribute to turnover. And aside from salaries, there are other ways to make teaching in Alaska more attractive—mentoring and other help for new teachers, especially in remote districts; more opportunities for professional development; and other policies that increase teachers' effectiveness and satisfaction with their jobs.

### Historical and Projected Alaska School-Age Population and Number of Teaching Positions, 2000 - 2024



Source: Alaska Department of Labor mid-range projections of numbers of Alaska children 5-17; ISER projections of number of teachers, based on share of school-age children expected to enroll in public schools and current pupil-teacher ratio.

### Historical and Projected Graduates of New Teacher Programs, Alaska Institutions of Higher Education



Source: ISER tabulations of data from UAF, UAS, UAA, Sheldon Jackson College, and APU.

### How Do Average Salaries of Alaska Teachers Compare With Others?

Rank among States, 2003-2004 year		Change in Average Salaries, 1994-2004		
			Nominal	Real**
1. Connecticut	\$57,337	1. Georgia	+49.7%	+17.8%
11. Alaska	\$51,736	U.S. Average	+30.8%	+2.9%
U.S. Average	\$46,752	*51. Alaska	+ 8.9%	- 14.3%

\*Includes Washington, D.C. \*\*Adjusted for inflation

Source: National Education Association, Estimates Database 2005

## ENDNOTES

1. D. Grissmer, A. Flanagan, et al. *Improving Student Achievement: What State NAEP Test Scores Tell Us*. Santa Monica, CA. RAND. 2002; K. Haycock. *Honor in the box car: Equalizing teacher quality*. Washington, D.C. The Education Trust. 2000.

2. Alliance for Excellent Education. "Teacher Attrition: A Costly Loss to the Nation and the States," *Issue Brief*. Washington, D.C.: Aughtor. 2005. Available at [www.All4ed.org](http://www.All4ed.org)

## FULL REPORT

*Alaska Teacher Supply and Demand, 2005 Update*. By Alexandra Hill and Diane Hirshberg. Available from ISER's offices (907-786-7710) and at [www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu](http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu)

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