

Opinion: Alaska's teacher exodus is no mystery

Frank Jeffries : 8-10 minutes



(iStock / Getty Images)

It is time to stop kicking the can down the road and blaming teachers and administrators for the low performance of our K-12 students. There is a clear reason students are underperforming and teacher turnover is so high. It becomes obvious when one looks at the increase in teacher turnover and the decline in student performance over time. Cutting the budget for education has resulted in the current state of affairs. Fully funding education is the only way to get our education system back near the top of the nation in student performance. Inadequate funding is the root cause of high teacher turnover and it results in lower student performance.

Alaska holds the national record for highest teacher turnover and has for years. It was not always this way. From 1996 to 2006 [turnover was steady](#) at about 12%, which is high but [nothing close](#) to the 22% to 24% we reached between 2012 and 2022. Turnover increased from [12% in 2006 to 14% in 2007](#) to 16% in 2012 and [then to 22% from that point on](#). The national teacher turnover rate is [currently around 7%](#), so Alaska has about triple the national average turnover for teachers in the K-12 system.

In 2006 an ISER study's authors stated there was no national teacher shortage and that Alaska's turnover rate was 12%. Teacher salaries in Alaska increased only 9% between

1994 and 2004 while the national average increase was 31%. When adjusted for cost of living, teacher salaries here were 14.3% [below the national average](#). They remain below the national average today.

Being below the national average in teacher compensation was not always the case. In 1980 Alaska teachers earned 170% of the national average and had a defined benefit retirement program. Over time this pay advantage was reduced to 130% in 1990 and to 110% from 2000 on. Compensation for Alaska's teachers lagged further behind as time went on. From 1992 to 2022 inflation was 108% and teacher salaries increased less than 70%. Alaska is one of only four states that lagged so [far behind the pace of inflation](#).

Another key component of teacher compensation is retirement benefits. Every other state has a defined benefit program. Alaska discontinued its [defined benefit program in 2006](#). Coincidentally, this is the same time teacher turnover began to spike.

A [more recent study by ISER](#) found there is now a national teacher shortage and fewer people are enrolling in teaching programs. This will drive competition for talent and push salaries higher as demand increases. The factors identified as discouraging people from pursuing teaching include low pay, high stress, workload and better alternative job opportunities in other fields.

Education funding in Alaska is nowhere near what it was in the 1990s, when turnover was half what it is today, 12% then compared with 22% for the last several years. It is also worth noting that lower pay and the elimination of the defined benefit retirement program in 2006 coincide with both higher teacher turnover and decreased student achievement.

Fourth grade reading achievement in 2005 was 6 points below the national average. It worsened to 15 points below in 2019 and was 13 points below in 2024. In 1996 fourth grade math achievement was 1 point above the national average. It fell to 2 points below in 2007 and began a steady decline to 11 points below in 2024. Eighth grade performance fared no better. Reading went from 6 points below the national average in 2006 to 15 points below in 2019 and was 13 points below in 2024. Math for eighth graders was 2 points below the national average in 2005 and steadily dropped to [11 points below in 2024](#). It is unlikely that this decline, which began when the defined benefit retirement program was scrapped and turnover increased, is merely coincidental.

This should not surprise anyone. Report after report has made it clear that teacher turnover negatively affects student achievement. One study found that when high-quality teachers leave districts there is an adverse impact on both [student performance and district fiscal operations](#). Teacher turnover lowers scores in English language arts and math, with the greatest negative impacts in schools [serving lower-performing students](#). Teacher experience [results in higher test scores](#) and [better student behavior](#). As [one recent research paper](#) concluded, "We find that turnover has marked and lasting negative consequences for the quality of the instructional staff and student achievement. Our

results highlight the need for heightened policy attention to school-specific issues of teacher retention.”

One way to avoid solving a problem is to study it, and study it we have. In 1991 the Legislature had ISER study [taxpayer equity in education funding](#). Education spending, distribution and cost factors were studied again and reported to the Legislature in 2019. The authors noted there was a teacher shortage, other states were increasing salaries and if Alaska did not keep up [our retention problems would worsen](#). In 2025 ISER reported that Alaska has [lagged behind national averages](#) in per-student spending for all years covered by its report. In 2021 the Legislature was told that 23% of teachers leave annually and the [cost to replace them](#) was \$36.7 million. The governor created a working group in 2020 to once again study the issue.

The working group’s report included survey results clearly indicating the [need to increase compensation](#). Three of the top five personal priorities for both teachers and administrators related to compensation, with salary ranked number one. When ranking potential solutions, the top ten all related to compensation in one way or another. The group produced an action plan to improve education in Alaska. However, regarding the most important item, compensation, it concluded: “Although salary topped the survey results, the working group recognizes that Alaska must first [address its current fiscal situation](#).”

The fact is, if salary, retirement and health care are not addressed first, none of the other recommendations will have a noticeable impact on turnover. Management literature has established for decades that market-level compensation is the foundation upon which everything else is built. Teacher and administrator compensation is not adequate and has not been for more than a decade. Refusing to fund education at a higher level will continue to produce high turnover and lower student outcomes.

The solution is to fund education at a level that allows the system to be rebuilt and to provide a superior K-12 education to every student. The superintendent of the Anchorage School District made the situation clear in his Feb. 4 opinion piece in the ADN (“[Rising costs, flat funding put Anchorage schools at a crossroads](#)”). We need to increase the BSA by \$1,000 now. The facts support this, and 77% of voters said they supported [a BSA increase last year](#).

It is time to stop making excuses about how difficult the job is and simply do it. The state constitution requires that education be funded at a level that meets students’ needs. It also gives the Legislature the authority and obligation to raise the funds necessary to meet the needs of government. Some will complain about paying taxes, even though Alaskans remain the lowest taxed people in the nation. Legislators were elected to make hard decisions. The solution will cost money. It is time to admit that and get the job done.

Frank Jeffries is a retired professor emeritus of management who taught for 24 years at the College of Business and Public Policy at the University of Alaska Anchorage after

spending 20 years in private industry in a variety of management positions.

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Opinion: We were honored as Alaska Teachers of the Year. Now we can no longer stay.

Ben Walker : 8-10 minutes



Ben Walker, a seventh grade science teacher at Romig Middle School, works with students after being named Alaska Teacher of the Year during a school assembly in October 2017. (Bill Roth / ADN archive)

In 2019, after being selected as Alaska’s 2018 State Teacher of the Year, I worked with other award-winning educators to pen an op-ed: “[Why teach in Alaska?](#)” At the time, we eagerly co-signed as we believed in dedicating a career to Alaska students and that our legislators and community wanted a thriving public education system.

My answer now is a heavy “I can’t.” My wife, [Catherine Walker](#) — the 2024 Alaska Teacher of the Year and one of four [National Teacher of the Year](#) finalists — and I are leaving. When two people recognized among the most dedicated by the state itself decide they no longer see a future, the “Alaska is a great place to teach” narrative hasn’t just frayed; it has disintegrated.

[*Related opinion: [Alaska’s teacher exodus is no mystery](#)*]

Leaving Alaska isn’t a choice made lightly. It is a heartbreaking conclusion forced by two decades of witnessing leadership denigrate and undervalue the profession we love. Let’s

start at the top: Gov. Mike Dunleavy is possibly the most [anti-public education governor](#) in the history of Alaska. Over eight years, he has [done little to improve](#) the educational experience of the 95% of young Alaskans coming through public schools every day. He has vetoed nearly every bill aimed at bettering public education, whether it be [funding](#), improving the lives of public school teachers or even taking care of the one school [directly in the state's care](#). While he pulls a public pension from our state coffers as a public school educator, he has systematically torn down public education through administration hires, funding vetoes, rhetoric and policy changes, and has been outwardly anti-teacher with the not-so-hidden purpose of funneling public money to inequitable and unaccountable [private and religious schools](#).

It doesn't stop there. One [lawmaker](#) in particular, Sen. Bert Stedman, has done more to fight the sincere efforts of educators and public employees to address the recruitment and retention crisis. He seems to view educators not as the backbone of our future but as a math problem to be solved with "handsome" half-truths and willful ignorance.

In a recent press conference, Sen. Stedman doubled down on the very rhetoric driving us out. He claimed our current retirement system is "generous" and ranks 11th in the nation. This is a staggering distortion. Alaska's educators know the truth: Our retirement system gets an F.

The reality is that Alaska is the only state in the union that offers its teachers [neither a defined-benefit pension nor Social Security](#). This retirement crisis is fueling the fire of our education system's collapse. We have the [worst educator turnover](#) in the country, and it is proven that high teacher turnover directly impacts student outcomes. When a student loses a teacher midyear or when a school replaces 30% of its staff annually, the continuity of learning is shattered. We are sacrificing our children's futures on the altar of a manufactured crisis of the early 2000s perpetuated by a Bush administration wanting to [privatize Social Security](#), a last-minute [fax to Senate President Ben Stevens](#), and a multibillion-dollar error and [lawsuit](#) by actuary firm Mercer [settled for pennies on the dollar](#) by anti-union Attorney General Dan Sullivan.

In Alaska, our retirement is not only [the worst in the nation](#) for teachers, it is the worst in the nation among all professionals. If any of us worked in the private sector with the educational level we have, we would have a 401(k) with an employer match. This is basically what we have with the state of Alaska. But that is where it stops. In the private sector, we would also be paying into Social Security, as would our employer. This is [not an option](#) for Alaska teachers. So we end up dead last in not only teacher retirement but retirement in general. And it is not just teachers; all public service areas, including state troopers and firefighters, are being decimated and finding it impossible to staff at the levels needed to provide a high quality of life to Alaskans.

"[Alaska is open for business](#)" seems to be a favorite refrain of those refusing to fulfill their constitutional duty to fund services while also refusing to get Alaskans' fair share from resource extraction. The funny thing is, 49 other states are also open for business, and all

49 arguably have better environments for teachers than Alaska. Alaska is a beautiful state and was a great place for us to raise our children outside and be active. But Alaska needs to realize you can kayak and fish in plenty of other states while also being treated like a professional and earning a secure pension, in addition to having a high quality of life due to funded and respected public sector services and employees.

Cat and I didn't want to leave. I've lived in Alaska since I was 2, and Cat was born here. We've raised two kids here and have family here. We wanted to stay and help build the world-class education system our leaders love to talk about. But you cannot have a world-class system when your leaders treat people like a disposable commodity or are actively working to destroy it.

We are the products of Alaska public schools and eagerly enrolled our kids in Anchorage public schools. All we have ever wanted, and all any of the thousands of families we have worked with over the years have ever wanted, is a robust public school experience for our children like we had growing up — one in which they have teachers who are experienced, feel supported and want to stay their entire career in one community and retire with security; schools with electives like art and music; and extracurriculars like sports, theater and clubs. Buildings that are safe and well maintained. At the same time, as community members, Alaskans deserve all public services to be well funded and maintained and public sector workers to be compensated and taken care of after a lifetime of service to Alaskans. As adults and parents, we have been front-row witnesses to the callous degradation of the quality of life in Alaska, where corporate interests come before residents, where we choose companies over sustainability, and out-of-state workers and tourists over our children. The criminal underfunding of education may be the canary, but unless Alaskans wake up and vote to retake control from corporations and those in power who do their bidding, Alaska as so many of us have known it growing up will no longer exist.

The most maddening part is that there are solutions and other options. This is not the only way. Other resource-heavy states and countries do not have continual deficits and treat public sectors with dignity and pay and benefits requisite with their experience. This problem of billions of dollars flowing through our state but continually having fiscal problems is a uniquely Alaskan experience. But when this is the case for a large chunk of someone's lifetime, like it has been for Cat and me, you realize it is time for us to change, as it is quite possible this state never will.

There really isn't much more to say that thousands of teachers, troopers, firefighters, families, students, business leaders and concerned community members haven't said year after year after year about funding, retirement, rhetoric and a complete disregard for the valuable contributions of public schools, public school teachers and all public service employees.

So I'll just end with, as Douglas Adams wrote, "Goodbye and thanks for all the fish."

Ben Walker is a National Board Certified Teacher who has taught at Romig Middle School for 20 years and is the 2018 Alaska State Teacher of the Year. He and his wife, Catherine, are proud parents of two public school students.

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Letter: We can't afford to lose more of our best public workers

Patrick Tomco : 3-4 minutes

The ADN editorial “[A pension promise we can't afford](#)” misses the mark on retirement reform. I'm surprised. Usually I see a thoughtful, research-based piece that the editorial staff writes after vetting a topic, sometimes penned to be provocative but overall a fair treatment. However, what I read misrepresented many essential parts of the story's complexity. It also minimized a question that retirement reform is trying to solve: How do we retain our best workers?

The statement around which the editorial frames the issue is true: Alaska has a large unfunded liability from the former pension system, estimated at \$7 billion-\$9 billion. However, it neglects to explain why that happened. First, one-third of the liability was due to an actuarial error. At the time, it was the largest settlement ever for actuarial mistakes, as Mercer Consulting deliberately concealed its errors from the state. For those seeking a return to a pension system, this is hardly a fair criticism. Second, the fund's underperformance was attributable in part to an overly generous 7% assumed rate of return. However, the state pulled the plug on this system in 2006, meaning the stock market declines of 2001 and 2008 hit the fund's assets hard. If the state had “stayed the course” and continued to contribute, those returns would have more than exceeded that calculated rate. Remember, the Dow just reached 50,000. Imagine if workers' contributions since 2006 had compounded over that time frame. Finally, retiree health care was pre-funded, and ballooning costs led to further shortfalls. Again, that is true, but the proposed new benefits system provides no health care benefits.

The editorial staff tries to frame the issue as, “Who pays for an unfunded liability?” Without minimizing this important point, another equally important question is, “What is the cost of losing your best workers?” That question is neglected. Teachers on the old system did not leave their districts until retirement age, but teachers on the new system have been leaving in droves during their prime years. We need those seasoned veterans around. Focused solutions, like a return to the supplemental benefits system, sound good and would be good for new hires, but not for those who are already 10 years into their careers and lack Social Security. For these teachers, the opportunity to “buy in” to a defined benefit system using prior earnings from their 401(k)-style plan would have real meaning for retention.

Newly hired state workers, and Alaska teachers in particular, have gotten an exceptionally raw deal from their state retirement plans over the past 20 years. We need to stop

reframing this issue as something else and act to fix it.

— **Patrick Tomco**, Anchorage

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Letter: Stop calling defined benefits a ‘taxpayer’ burden

Stephen Edwards : 2-2 minutes

Last week’s [editorial on pensions](#) contained unusually poor language. I disagree with the points made and believe the state needs to create a pension of some form, even if it is not as generous as in the past.

But what really jumped out was the use of the word “taxpayers” — not once, but twice in the article.

Surely the board knows that Alaskans have not paid a state income tax since 1980, and not one cent of the pension system shortfall was paid by “taxpayers” unless you count oil taxes from resource extraction.

Everyone knows the taxes we pay to local governments or the IRS are not used to fund the state’s pension systems.

The editorial board should be able to make its point without using inflammatory language that is not based in fact.

— **Stephen Edwards**, *Wasilla*

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Opinion: Fixing Alaska’s revolving door requires reality, not rhetoric

Roxanne Abajian : 4-6 minutes



The Alaska State Capitol Building in downtown Juneau. (iStock / Getty Images)

The recent ADN editorial on legislative issues (“[The Legislature is back. Don’t let one big idea eat the whole session.](#)”) correctly urged all of us to make steady progress on common-sense issues, such as maintaining basic services — education for one. However, the editorial’s broad reference to a defined-benefit pension system did not adequately describe the proposed and well-considered legislation to modernize Alaska’s retirement system. The reference was simplistic and could be misleading.

The ADN’s editorial pointed to the call for a defined-benefit pension, but it’s important to note that the proposed legislation is not the same Tier 1, 2, or 3 defined-benefit pension system familiar to many. In reality, current proposals like [House Bill 78/Senate Bill 28](#) (and Senate Bill 88 in the 33rd Legislature, and HB 220 in the 32nd Legislature) are modeled after modern best practices. Unlike the old system, where the state bore all the risk, these proposals are shared-risk retirement structures in which employees and retirees have “skin in the game.” HB 78 is designed to ensure the pension system remains solvent by building in protections that adjust based on market performance and ensure the state is

not the sole backer of the pension fund. Employees will share the risk by contributing more during poor market returns. HB 78 provides a pension, but protects the state.

The most urgent cost of our current instability is the erosion of public safety. Alaska has become a subsidized training ground for the Pacific Northwest. We spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to recruit and train Alaska State Troopers, police officers and firefighters, only to watch them vest their minimal benefits and move to departments in Washington or Oregon that offer the retirement security Alaska lacks. When we lose a veteran officer, we lose decades of investigative experience and community trust that cannot be replaced by a sign-on bonus.

The financial data support this urgency. Alaska is currently paying nearly \$150 million annually in bonuses, overtime and call-out pay just to keep basic services running while grappling with a state department vacancy rate exceeding 17%. [Teresa Ghilarducci](#), a renowned economist, estimates that by implementing a stable defined benefit pension system and reducing turnover across all job classes — from public safety to general employees — Alaska stands to save a conservative \$76 million annually.

The financial toll of a volatile and uncertain workforce is a hemorrhage of public funds. According to estimates from the Anchorage School District, every teacher who walks out the door costs taxpayers \$27,000 in recruitment and retraining — a preventable \$10 million annual drain. This is just in our largest urban community. Educator turnover is even worse in rural and coastal Alaska.

Yet, the most devastating debt isn't found in a ledger; it's measured in lost learning. High turnover is a direct predictor of lower student achievement, overcrowded classrooms, and chronic absenteeism. We can quantify the millions of dollars wasted on turnover, but we cannot calculate the educational debt forced on our children every time an experienced educator leaves Alaska for a more stable future elsewhere.

It is time for lawmakers to stop tiptoeing around the need for a defined-pension plan. Recruitment and retention *are* real problems. For decades, we have tried to solve the retention crisis with stopgaps like one-time bonuses. It hasn't worked. We cannot continue to court the "twinkle" of future revenue while our current workforce evaporates and our streets become less safe.

We need a retirement system that rewards service but shares the risk, and stops the \$150 million annual drain on our treasury. Let's fund a system built on modern data, not outdated fears. Our state's safety and our students' future depend on it.

Roxanne Abajian has lived in Ketchikan for 46 years. She retired after 38 years of teaching, 37 of those years in Ketchikan.

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Letter: A practical path to education stability

Karl Schleich : 2-2 minutes

Thank you to the members of the Legislature who have recognized a fundamental problem within our state's education system and proposed a viable solution: [HB 78](#). Special thanks to Rep. Chuck Kopp, who has consistently provided information to the public about the ins and outs of the proposed legislation (“[We built the pipeline. We can build stability](#),” Feb. 17).

How long do we have to observe the impacts of a decision made years ago that has resulted in fewer qualified people applying for our teaching and administrative positions, and a continued revolving door of teachers coming to Alaska only to depart within five years, taking their retirement investments with them? The change made years ago has not worked, nor will it work if recruiting and retaining quality people is the objective.

HB 78 is not the defined benefits program from the '80s that Tier 1 and 2 employees enjoy. Rather, it is a scaled-down, practical approach with built-in mechanisms to reduce the risks to the state. I urge residents who care about public education to learn more about HB 78 and encourage their legislators to support it. Alaska cannot afford to not make these kinds of changes.

— **Karl Schleich**, Anchorage

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Letter: We need good teachers and they don't come cheap

Brian Brubaker : 2-2 minutes

Yes, Anchorage Daily News, teacher pensions are more expensive and riskier for Alaska than 401(k)s.

Every worker deserves a pension. Baby boomers rely on their three-legged stool — employer pension, Social Security and 401(k) savings. Gen X knows that working until you die is not a retirement plan. Teachers are some of the lowest-paid professionals out there. How are they supposed to have anything left to save into a 401(k)?

All other states offer teacher pensions. Alaska doesn't prepare enough teachers for Alaska's needs. We have to compete and hire from Outside.

My kid — every kid — deserves a teacher motivated by competitive pay and benefits to make education their No. 1 career choice, in their local public school.

In 2025, the Legislature overrode the veto of the Base Student Allocation increase with the highest veto threshold of any state. So [read the room](#), ADN. We need good teachers, and they don't come cheap.

We can't be the only state in the country without a teacher pension and expect to be anything but dead last in education outcomes. Pay pensions for good teachers now, or pay more later — when generations of students who didn't learn can't support themselves and need handouts or prisons.

— **Brian Brubaker**, Anchorage

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