



# RESEARCH SUMMARY

## TURNOVER AMONG ALASKA TEACHERS: IS IT CHANGING?

By Alexandra Hill and Diane Hirshberg

Turnover among Alaska's teachers was roughly the same in 2007 as it had been in 1999, with about 14% leaving their school districts (Figure 1). Turnover also remained twice as high in rural as in urban districts—about 22%, compared with 10%.

That lack of broad change comes after years of efforts by Alaska's state government, universities, and school districts to reduce teacher turnover, especially in rural areas.

The Institute of Social and Economic Research has been tracking Alaska's progress in reducing teacher turnover since 2004, in partnership with the Alaska Teacher Placement program, the Department of Education and Early Development, and university teacher training programs.

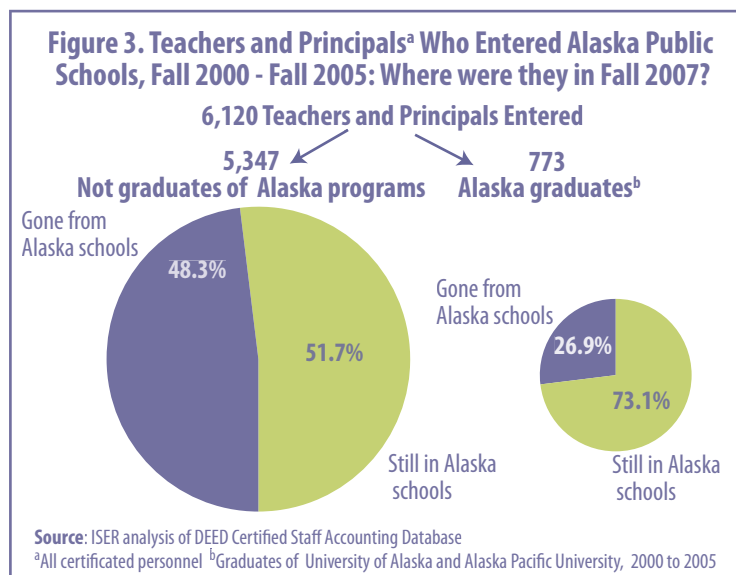
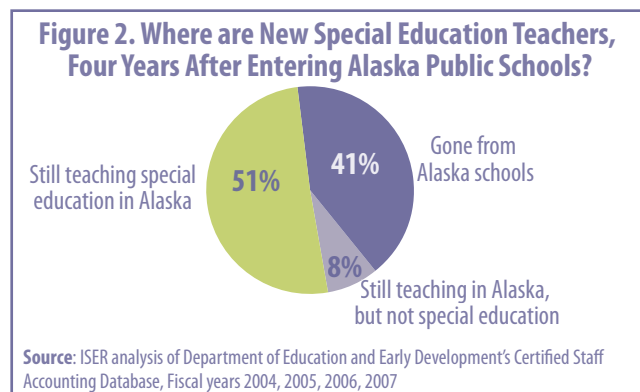
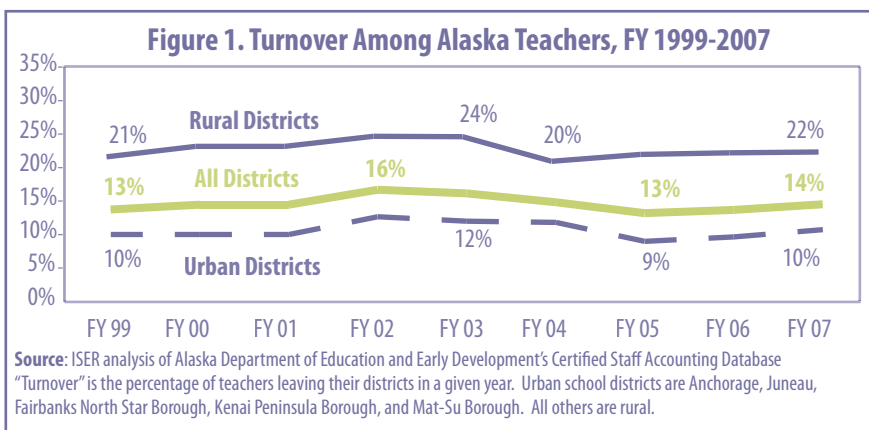
Some turnover is inevitable, as teachers retire, quit teaching, or move to other districts—and up to a point turnover is good, bringing in new teachers and ideas. But schools don't want too much turnover. Recruiting new teachers is expensive, and research has linked high teacher turnover with lower student achievement. There's no broad agreement about how much annual turnover is too much—some think more than 5% is too much—but most educators agree that by 20%, turnover is worrisome.

Here we summarize our latest findings on teacher turnover in Alaska. Earlier reports are available on our Web site ([www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu](http://www.iser.uaa.alaska.edu)).

- *Efforts to reduce turnover have succeeded in some cases, even though the statewide figures don't show much change. A good example is the Bering Strait School District in western Alaska, which reduced average annual turnover from about 30% to 20% in recent years.*

- *Keeping special education teachers in Alaska schools is particularly difficult, with half the new special education teachers gone within four years. As Figure 2 shows, only 51% of new special education teachers were still on the job four years after they started. Of the others, 41% were gone from Alaska schools, and 8% were still teaching—but something other than special education. We also know from previous ISER research that special education jobs are also among the hardest to fill to begin with.*

- *Teachers and principals who graduate from programs in Alaska are more likely to stay. Of the Alaska graduates who came into the state's schools between 2000 and 2005, almost three-quarters were still there in 2007, compared with about half among those who graduated from programs outside Alaska (Figure 3). This is of particular interest to policymakers, who wonder if training more teachers here would reduce turnover. But Alaska graduates made up only about 13% of those who came into the schools between 2000 and 2005. To have a bigger effect on turnover rates, Alaska would need to train many more teachers.*



• *The more experience teachers have, the more likely they are to stay on the job.* Figure 4 shows that those who have been teaching six or more years have the lowest turnover rates—and have had for the past decade. In 2007, about 11% of the most experienced teachers left their districts, compared with almost 24% of those new to teaching.

• *Turnover among teachers with a year or less of experience is high in both urban and rural districts—and it has increased sharply in urban districts* (Figure 5). Turnover among new teachers is still twice as high in rural districts as in urban—about 33% compared with 17%—but that turnover rate is about the same as in 1999. In the urban districts (Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, the Kenai Peninsula, and the Mat-Su Borough), turnover among new teachers almost doubled between 1999 and 2007.

• *Rural principals are even more likely than teachers to leave their jobs* (Figure 6). Turnover among rural principals was 27% in 2007, compared with less than 22% among rural teachers. Among principals in urban districts, the turnover rate is about the same as among teachers—around 10%.

• *Several ongoing and recent changes may be affecting turnover.* Alaska teacher salaries are still above the U.S. average, but that pay premium has been declining for 20 years—from 58% above the U.S. average in 1987 to 10% by 2005 (Table 1). Alaska salaries have historically been higher, to compensate for the state’s higher costs, especially in remote areas. Rising energy prices in particular are adding to already high costs in remote areas.

Also, in 2005 the state changed the teacher licensing system, requiring teachers certified after 2006 to complete two performance reviews, graded by a state panel. It’s too early to tell how that requirement may affect retention, but some rural superintendents believe it may be causing new teachers to leave rather than do the reviews.

And in 2006, the state changed the teacher retirement system. New teachers will not be eligible for traditional pensions, with defined benefits based on years of service. Instead, the state will make contributions to retirement accounts, and new teachers’ retirement income will depend on how well those accounts are invested over the long run. The effects of that shift aren’t clear yet.

**Table 1. Average Teacher Contract Salaries**

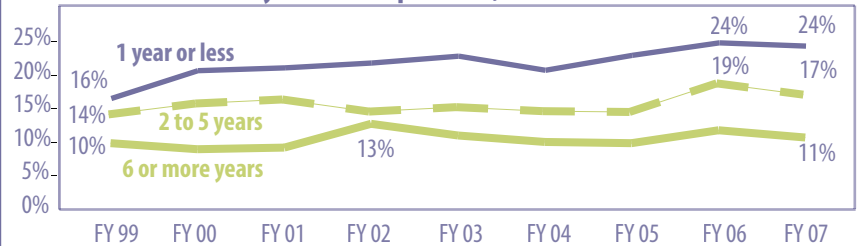
	1986-87	1996-97	2004-05
Average, 50 states	\$26,615	\$38,346	\$47,602
Alaska	\$42,063	\$49,140	\$52,467
Alaska as % of U.S. Average	158%	120%	110%

Source: American Federation of Teachers

## CONCLUSIONS

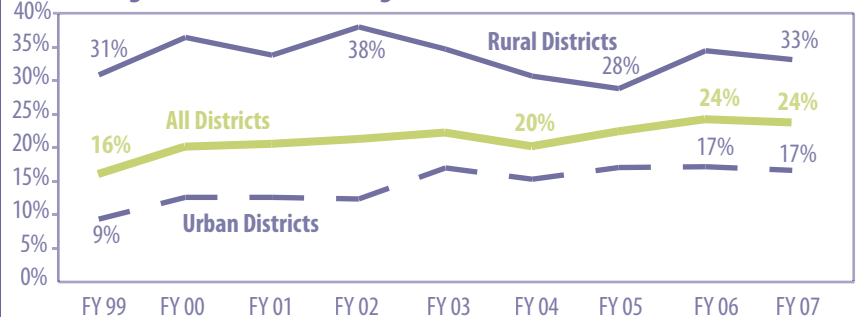
To put Alaska teacher turnover in context, it’s useful to know that turnover in Alaska’s largest districts is roughly comparable to turnover in mid-sized cities nationwide. By contrast, turnover in Alaska’s rural districts is higher than turnover just about anywhere in the U.S.—except in inner-city neighborhoods in America’s largest cities. Conditions unique to remote rural Alaska certainly contribute to high turnover—the shortage of good housing,

**Figure 4. Turnover Among Alaska Teachers, By Years of Experience, FY 1999-2007**



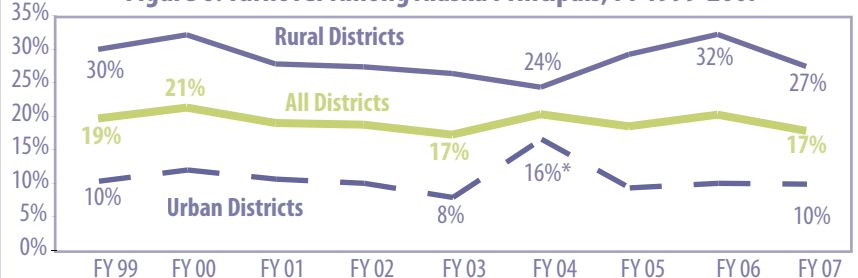
Source: ISER analysis of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development’s Certified Staff Accounting Database  
“Turnover” is the percentage of teachers leaving their districts in a given year. These are averages of turnover in all Alaska districts, among teachers with different levels of experience.

**Figure 5. Turnover Among New Alaska Teachers, FY 1999-2007**



Source: ISER analysis of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development’s Certified Staff Accounting Database  
New teachers have 1 year or less of experience. “Turnover” is the percentage of teachers leaving their districts in a year. Urban school districts are Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Kenai Peninsula Borough, and Mat-Su Borough. All others are rural.

**Figure 6. Turnover Among Alaska Principals, FY 1999-2007**



Source: ISER analysis of Alaska Department of Education and Early Development’s Certified Staff Accounting Database  
\* In FY04 Anchorage offered principals an incentive to retire. Turnover is the percent of principals leaving their districts each year. Urban districts: Anchorage, Juneau, Fairbanks North Star Borough, Kenai Peninsula Borough, and Mat-Su Borough. Others are rural.

high living costs, isolation, difficulties and costs of travel, and limited access to medical care, to name some.

But reducing that turnover is critical, and ISER will continue tracking it. There are also questions that extend beyond our research. How can we get more of Alaska’s young people interested in teaching? What kinds of incentives would keep more teachers in the classroom? Are there more effective ways the universities and the school districts can work together to improve teacher recruitment and provide support for new teachers?

The Alaska Legislature has shown interest in preparing more teachers in-state, and both the University of Alaska and Alaska Pacific University are taking steps to train more teachers and create new options for teacher training. And some programs and some districts have had success in reducing turnover. Many people are looking for solutions—but as the overall turnover numbers make clear, we all need to keep looking.