



# BUILDING THE FUTURE, ONE TEACHER AT A TIME

Workforce Innovation Grants propel solutions to the teacher shortage



June 2025



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# REIMAGINING WISCONSIN'S TEACHER PIPELINE



*June 2025*

Like many other states, Wisconsin in recent years has faced a workforce shortage driven primarily by an aging population and slowing birthrates. Given our already high labor participation rate—one of the top among U.S. states—in Wisconsin we've chosen to focus our efforts on helping communities and workers overcome the remaining barriers to full employment.

In 2021, Governor Tony Evers created the Workforce Innovation Grant (WIG) Program to encourage communities to identify local workforce needs and develop and implement solutions that could be replicated elsewhere. Jointly administered by the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) and the Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation (WEDC), the program used funding from the American Rescue Plan Act to award \$128 million to 27 projects across the state.

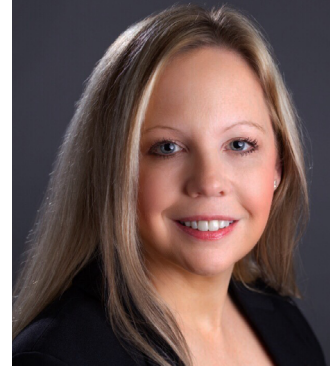
In this inaugural report, we detail the successes and lessons of WIG-funded teacher pipeline programs. We hope this series of reports will provide clarity and direction, provoke thought, and inspire more problem-solving approaches to secure opportunity for all Wisconsin residents.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, flowing 'M' followed by a horizontal line.

Melissa L. Hughes  
Secretary and CEO  
Wisconsin Economic Development Corporation

# CREATING SOLUTIONS TO REGIONAL HIRING CHALLENGES



*June 2025*

The Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is proud to support the WIG-funded projects in this report, which are creatively working to bolster the workforce pipeline for an in-demand occupational sector with significant shortages of qualified and skilled workers in Wisconsin and across the nation.

Wisconsin will have a projected 6,000 teacher position openings annually over the next 10 years in preschool, primary, secondary, and special education, according to DWD data. The state faces challenges in attracting students into the programs that train teachers—and also in hiring and retaining these professionals once trained.

While the challenges are significant, the projects highlighted in this report are examples of the creative, local solutions to regional workforce challenges that Governor Tony Evers envisioned when he invested a groundbreaking \$158 million to address the state's workforce needs and support innovative pandemic recovery efforts.

The Workforce Solutions Initiative is composed of three programs, including WIG, that have delivered workforce training and supportive services to 18,000 Wisconsin residents since they began, and continue to yield results.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Amy Pechacek'.

Amy Pechacek  
Secretary  
Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development





# THE CHALLENGE

## *CLASSROOM CRISIS: WISCONSIN CONFRONTS A TEACHER SHORTAGE*

Skilled, committed, and caring teachers lie at the heart of a strong K-12 educational system. But in Wisconsin and across the nation, attracting and retaining teachers has become a pressing concern.

Teachers are leaving the field, school districts are struggling to fill vacancies, and children and families are caught in the middle.

The Department of Public Instruction's report found that about four of every 10 beginning teachers either leave the state or the profession altogether within their first six years. The reasons are many; compensation, personal reasons, work-life balance, workload, and the lure of other professions were often cited. The worst shortages, the report found, were in special education.

The challenge has spurred Wisconsin to think creatively about ways to attract and retain teachers, especially in rural areas.

"Our education workforce is in crisis," Jill Underly, Wisconsin State Superintendent of Public Instruction, said when releasing a 2024 workforce analysis showing that teachers are leaving the profession in alarming numbers. "Wisconsin kids are suffering from losing quality teachers."





# THE VISION

## *PROGRAMS FOSTER RURAL TEACHING, CREATE PROMISING FUTURES FOR STUDENTS*

As part of its work to develop an Economy for All, Wisconsin had the vision to tackle targeted workforce needs in a variety of areas, including transportation, education, health care, and housing, among others. A total of \$128 million was awarded to 27 projects during the course of the program.

The WIG Program harnessed the power of creativity, regional collaboration, and innovative solutions to longtime local workforce needs. The grants encouraged development of leading-edge, long-term solutions enabling businesses and institutions to find ways to connect people to resources that meet communities' needs, support businesses' hiring goals, and help people find family-supporting careers more easily.

Two of these WIG-funded projects are tackling the teacher shortage by harnessing creativity, regional collaboration, and innovative solutions to longtime problems. One program provides incentives for rural students to become teachers in their home school districts or a nearby district. The other builds relationships between the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire and nearby school districts to build the area's educational workforce. Both approaches have resulted in new ways to introduce top-notch teachers to rural school districts and retain them.





# INNOVATION ONE:

## *THE GROW COOPERATIVE USES SCHOLARSHIPS TO ATTRACT FUTURE TEACHERS TO RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS.*

A consortium of four smaller school districts within about 30 miles of Madison banded together to create a “grow your own” teacher program, providing incentives to promising students to pursue careers in rural classrooms.

The GROW Cooperative (involving districts in Wisconsin Heights, Lodi, Sauk Prairie, and Cambridge) is at the forefront of an emerging trend toward school districts developing their own teachers to help fill shortages.

### *GROW OFFERS THREE TIERS:*

1. High school students interested in teaching receive mentoring locally and gain high-school credit. They can earn up to 12 college credits in education through the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater to jump-start their college journey and earn a \$1,000 scholarship upon high school graduation.
2. Once they are in college, education majors can compete to earn \$2,000 scholarships.
3. Finally, students in their senior year of college can earn a \$10,000 scholarship, contingent on them applying and interviewing for a position in one of the consortium’s four school districts. Then, they must teach for three years in a consortium district.

### *THE SITUATION:*

Overall, educators  
have borrowed an average of

**\$55,800**

and still owe an average of

**\$58,700**

because of low salaries and  
hefty interest rates.

Source: National Education Association, 2021



“Our goal was to have students  
come out of college with less debt  
so they could feel like they could  
commit to being a teacher  
because they didn’t have  
\$100,000 of debt to pay off.”

Liz Dostal, Director of Teaching and Learning  
School District of Cambridge



Student loan debt and  
teachers’ salaries are  
in conflict.



## THE EXPERIENCE:

Liz Dostal, Director of Teaching and Learning for the School District of Cambridge, leads the consortium and applied for the \$264,000 WIG that gave the program an important start. Looking ahead to continuing the program once the grant performance period ends, each district contributes \$24,000 annually to an account that ensures the scholarships will remain available in the future.

The consortium awarded five \$10,000 student scholarships in August 2022, and four of those five individuals signed contracts with member districts. The other student was hired by a district where she student-taught, and that district repaid her scholarship.

**Through March 2025, the consortium awarded:**

**EIGHT**  
**\$1,000**  
scholarships

**TWENTY**  
**\$2,000**  
scholarships

**NINETEEN**  
**\$10,000**  
scholarships

“Our goal was to have students come out of college with less debt so they could feel like they could commit to being a teacher because they didn’t have \$100,000 of debt to pay off,” Dostal said.

Scholarship recipients say the awards are particularly helpful during their student-teaching stints toward the end of their college curriculum because that hands-on work is unpaid while tuition payments continue. Niki Schoeneman, now a fifth-grade teacher in Lodi, gave up her educational assistant role with the district in her 40s to attain her teaching degree at UW-Platteville.

“My husband and I have four children, so to have a whole semester where I wasn’t working, the scholarship was very impactful,” she said. “I would encourage anyone looking to get into teaching to look at rural schools for the opportunities they offer.”

Zach Licht went into teaching for the relationships and the ability to be a mentor.

“You’re their Superman or Captain America, and to be involved in their lives as they grow up—that’s important to me. That’s what teaching is about for me.”

- Zach Licht, \$10,000 scholarship recipient and first-year teacher in the Lodi School District 2024

## THE EXPERIENCE:

And Garrett Schreiber, a fifth-grade teacher in Lodi, said the \$10,000 scholarship helped him make it through his student-teaching semester after he gave up an earlier career as a banker to become a teacher.

"I didn't have to teach Monday through Friday and then take a weekend job. I was able to work on becoming a better teacher. I like smaller towns and I love the kids. The Midwestern values are small-town values, and I share those with the parents here."

- Garrett Schreiber, Lodi High School graduate

Dostal said that, in recent years, applications have dwindled. "In past years, you'd have a plethora of qualified applicants for a teaching job, but lately we've been seeing two or three applicants for a high school English job and no applicants for technology education and family and consumer sciences."

While rural schools still face challenges in hiring, GROW has helped refill that applicant pool with qualified, motivated teachers.

Many new teachers express a strong interest in staying close to the high schools they graduated from, Dostal said. "So, we knew that if we could attract kids from our districts, we are in close enough proximity that we could generate this pool that would be interested in staying in our area."

Vince Breunig, district superintendent for Lodi schools, said the program offers a pathway and incentive for students interested in returning to their hometowns and helps administrators lessen the stress of trying to fill vacancies.

"A lot of areas are looking for staff. We can't cut services like an oil-change place can. My kids are coming. I have to figure it out," said Breunig. "It's a good message to send to our staff and communities that we're hitting this head-on and taking some positive steps."



## THE RESULTS: 2023–2024



# 16 GROW STUDENTS

signed contracts in the first two years of the program.



## LESSONS LEARNED:

Dostal said the consortium has gleaned some important lessons since GROW's rollout.

### 1. Form a consortium of similar districts to attack the shared problem.

"That's where the power lies," she said. "You can't do this by yourself. You need at least four districts. You're not going to know exactly who you're going to need to fill a teaching position, but you can pretty much guarantee that between four districts, there will be openings."

It's also important to consider scholarship applicants from nearby districts, she said: "If they're willing to go through the process and commit to our district, why not?"

### 2. Develop systems to stay organized and share information.

District groups should also consider ways to organize and track applications, such as through Qualtrics and spreadsheets, to ease application reviews and give all members access to the same materials in a convenient way. Rubrics that detail scholarship judging criteria are also crucial, she said.

### 3. Develop a set of shared priorities.

Dostal also recommended close communication between consortium members to assign priorities. Do you award only to alumni? Do you target specific certification areas? How do members fund the program?

So far, administrators and scholarship recipients are big believers in the power of GROW and its potential.





## INNOVATION TWO: *UW-EAU CLAIRE CONNECTS STUDENT TEACHERS WITH RURAL COMMUNITIES.*

The University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire is creating lasting relationships with rural districts, introducing education students to the rural teaching experience, and supporting them as their careers take off.

“We have to help our students fall in love with the idea of living and working in these rural communities,” said Carmen Manning, Dean of UW-Eau Claire’s College of Education and Human Sciences.

### THE FIVE PROGRAM COMPONENTS:

Funded by about \$1.9 million in Workforce Innovation Grants, the program offers several components to nurture prospective teachers, student teachers, and early-career teachers in rural districts. Those components include:

1. Micro-immersion trips to rural classrooms for education students
2. Rural teacher placements and scholarships
3. Housing for student teachers and social work interns in selected rural areas
4. A nontraditional pathway to earning special education teaching credentials
5. A rural teacher support network to mentor early-career teachers

### THE SITUATION:

More than

**45%**

of rural schools with  
vacancies reported having  
difficulties filling them.

Source: Ingersoll, R. M., & Tran, H. (2023).  
Teacher Shortages and Turnover in Rural Schools  
in the US: An Organizational Analysis. *Educational  
Administration Quarterly*, 59(2), 396-431.

Connecting student teachers  
with rural classrooms puts these  
communities on their radars for  
post-college employment.



Building a pipeline of rural  
teachers is about building  
relationships between  
students and communities.

## THE EXPERIENCE:

Micro-immersion trips introduce students to rural classrooms early in their academic careers, spotlighting rural teaching as a career opportunity. Students spend time in classrooms and have one-on-one interactions with teachers.

"It seems the students are connecting a little bit differently with the teachers who know that the students are there because they want to learn about the needs of rural districts," said Manning, Dean of UW-Eau Claire's College of Education and Human Sciences. "I've heard from a couple of our students that they're still in touch with those teachers."

"It's a way for students to spend a day with their teacher in their content area, and if they get a chance maybe they'll come here and student-teach, and maybe we can eventually hire them."

*- Ryan Bargender, Abbotsford District Administrator, host of several micro-immersion trips*

Paul Franzwa, superintendent of the Independence School District, who recently hired a new UW-Eau Claire graduate to teach high school English, said the immersion trips have impact. "We always debrief with the students after the day, and they talk about the tight-knit family we have. They like the idea of K-12 being in the same building. It allows them to see what rural education is," he said.

The university has also focused on providing incentives for its students to teach in rural districts. The grant funding enables students to receive a \$2,000-per-quarter scholarship if they do their unpaid student-teaching in a rural district.

These tuition scholarships use the lion's share of the grant funding and have paid for 762 placements for 577 student teachers in rural districts.



“Many of our students are working 30 to 40 hours a week in addition to going to school,” said Jennifer Sisum, teacher education program coordinator at UW-Eau Claire. The grant funding “takes away a lot of the financial stress.”

For some student teachers and interning social workers, the university is also able to provide free housing near their districts.

In Rice Lake, students stay rent- and utility-free in Glenwood Commons, a housing unit owned by a nonprofit and designed for students at UW-Eau Claire-Barron County. And in Marshfield, they stay in a housing unit associated with UW-Stevens Point-Marshfield.

“In terms of economic development in those counties, if they’re able to hire teachers and social workers to well-paying jobs, you’re bringing in someone with spending power who’ll maybe buy a house there. There’s a ripple effect to it,” said Leah Olson-McBride, chair of the university’s social work department.

But while officials hoped the living arrangement resulted in students becoming embedded in the community, that was not always the case, because they often returned to Eau Claire on weekends because they were leasing apartments or had opportunities to pick up shifts at other jobs, Olson-McBride said.

Mitchell Hanson, who spent a semester in the Rice Lake facility while he student-taught at Rice Lake Middle School and Cumberland High School, said the free housing was crucial. Hanson aims to teach full-time in northern Wisconsin.

“I didn’t have to work, and it freed up my time to focus on what I was doing. It was definitely a huge help,” he said, noting that he returned to Eau Claire on the weekends. “I kept my apartment, which gave me a way to come back and be able to socialize with friends, which is a great help with isolation in Rice Lake. I’m away from a lot of the people I know.”

## THE RESULTS:



# 577 STUDENT TEACHERS

have been placed in 762 rural  
placements to date





Almost every study of teacher shortages identifies special education as a pressing need. The university used grant funding to create an online degree program that combines special education and general education as a unified program.

Aimed at adult learners with some college credits and education paraprofessionals, the program equips graduates with two licenses—one in elementary education and another in K-12 special education. Students take two eight-week classes at a time instead of four semester-long classes, making it easier for them to juggle work and school.

“Many of these people can’t just stop working to get the rest of their degree,” Manning said. “But they’re already in a school, many of them in a rural district and connected to their communities.”

**Called SETT: Transition to Teaching, the program had 21 students in its first cohort and 30 more students in the second, which will graduate in fall 2026.**

The Rural Teacher Network consists of 13 school districts: Abbotsford, Barron, Colby, Clear Lake, Durand, Edgar, Eleva-Strum, Elk Mound, Gilmanton, Greenwood, Independence, Mondovi, and Whitehall. These districts have hosted UW-Eau Claire student teachers for many years, but the grant has helped formalize and deepen these relationships through the Rural Teacher Network.

The network helps administrators in those districts share ideas, strategies, and new approaches to meeting the challenges of hiring in their rural districts. UW-Eau Claire has also provided professional development for network schools and others, recently staging a series of sessions for first- through fourth-year teachers on using artificial intelligence in education.



## LESSONS LEARNED:

### 1. Target ways to sustain programming.

As a program designed to spark innovation through thoughtful creativity, Workforce Innovation Grants are intended to support pilots with the promise of expanding to a statewide reach. UW-Eau Claire officials are building a program that will long outlast its initial funding and are pursuing funding pathways to ensure continued success.

### 2. Be realistic about the housing component and students' lives.

Olson-McBride said the subsidized housing component has worked well but didn't yield the cultural experience organizers hoped for. "It's a huge advantage for them to have this financial support," she said. "I thought it would be like a rural study abroad. But I overestimated students' willingness to leave their community here in Eau Claire. Now, I've realized that that's pretty normal."

### 3. Build strong, lasting relationships.

Administrators discovered that relationship building is at the heart of developing young teachers interested in assignments in rural areas. Manning said the grant has demonstrated the importance of district relationships that are less transactional.

"What the grant has done is help us think more intentionally about who we want to develop relationships with and building those rural relationships because of who we are and our mission as an institution," she said.

## THE CONCLUSION:

Classroom teachers who are prepared to motivate students to achieve and inspire them to succeed are at the core of our educational system. If Wisconsin is going to remain true to its reputation for a high-quality school system, we need teachers who are both passionate and qualified.

As districts—especially in rural areas—struggle to attract and retain skilled teachers, these WIG-funded programs are helping draw them into the profession, embed them in rural districts, and mentor them to help fulfill their potential as young teachers. With the grant program's help, districts are banding together to tackle the challenges they share in hiring promising teachers.

The grant-funded initiatives are building career pipelines that will produce the teachers who will not only sustain but surpass families' expectations of local education. These teachers will shape the educational and career trajectories of the students in their classrooms for years to come.