WISCONSIN INSTITUTE FOR LAW & LIBERTY

DEFUNDING CLASSROOMS:

Investigating the Rise of Bureaucracy in K-12 Schools

By Will Flanders

Will Flanders
POLICY DIRECTOR
Flanders@will-law.org

Executive Summary

Under new spending bills recently signed into law, public schools will see funding increases of more than $1 billion.[i] At such a time, it is even more critical that taxpayers are assured that their hard-earned money is being spent wisely by the public-school bureaucracy. In this new study, WILL examined several years of spending data on Wisconsin's school districts. We find that there is wide variation in how school districts spend. In many districts, the amount spent on administrators who have little or no contact with students is eyebrow-raising.

Among the key findings of this report:

Total staff in schools has increased since 2017. The number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) in Wisconsin schools has grown by 2.67% over this time frame, even as statewide enrollment declined by 3.6%.

Student-teacher ratios have declined across the state. Despite staffing shortages, the dramatic decline in student enrollment over the past five years resulted in student-teacher ratios declining from 14.60 to 13.67 over the past five years.

Teachers with Master's Degrees do not improve student performance. Although teachers who have earned a Master's degree receive higher pay, student proficiency is not higher in districts that have more teachers with Master's degrees.

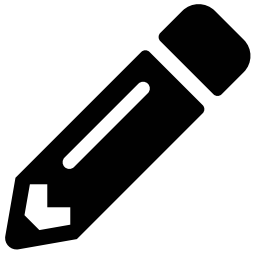
"Woke" positions are among the largest areas of growth.
While the absolute number of FTEs in these areas remains relatively low, the number of FTEs employed in connection with buzzwords like "Social-Emotional Behavioral Interventions/Support" and "Multicultural Education/Equity" are among the five fastest growing areas over the past five years.

Administrative staff varies extensively by district.
It is difficult to assess whether a district is investing taxpayer dollars wisely in staffing when administrative staff percentages vary drastically across the state. For example, about 47% of FTEs in Gibraltar School District were administrative—compared with about 8% in Shawano School District.

Introduction

A century ago, the education of American children was often handled in one-room school houses, like those described by Wisconsin native Laura Ingalls Wilder in her Little House on the Prairie books. There was no front office or administration at all. Indeed, in most cases, the lone teacher served as "the principal, custodian, nurse, counselor and occasionally the cook."[ii] While there are doubtless many pluses and minuses to this approach, it can be said that American education since the early 20th Century has moved so far from this approach as to make it unrecognizable.

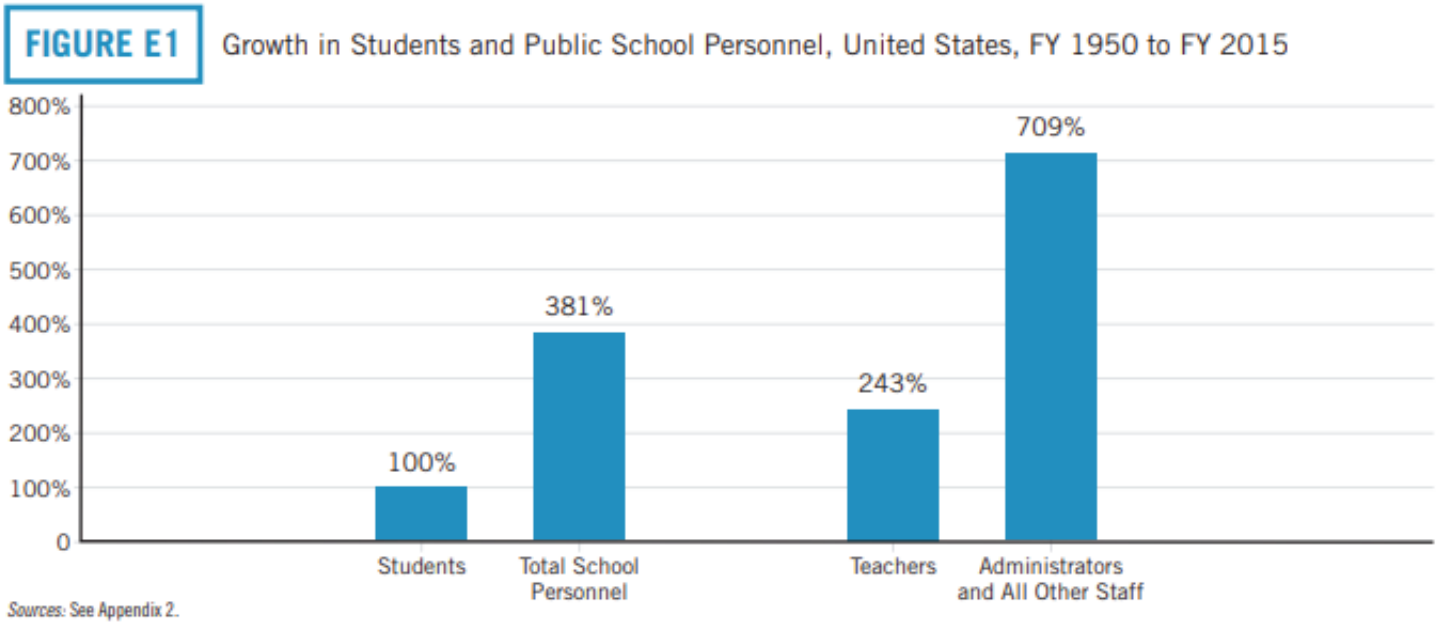
Modern education sees multiple levels of bureaucracy layered on top of the student-teacher relationship, and in the last few decades the extent of that bureaucracy has exploded. Partially driven by the influence of federal funding in the states, the number of school district employees who only rarely have direct interactions with students has grown by more than 700% since the 1950s, while the number of students has only grown by 100%. In this study, we will use data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction to explore changes in the teaching work force in Wisconsin. We highlight how much this varies from school district to school district, and we explore the potential consequences for students throughout the state.



Previous Research

In recent years, education reformers around the nation have placed a great deal of emphasis on the phenomenon of increasing numbers of non-teaching staff in schools. One of the most thorough examinations of this was Dr. Ben Scafidi's Back to the Staffing Surge published by EdChoice.[iii] Figure 1 below, reproduced from that report, shows that while the number of students in American schools had grown by 100% from 1950 to 2015, the number of teachers had grown more (243%), and the number of administrative and other staff had grown by a staggering 709%.

Figure 1. Growth in Students, Teachers, and Other Staff, 1950-2015
(Source: Back to the Staffing Surge, EdChoice)



The study notes that this increase in staffing has come at a huge cost to taxpayers, with little evidence for a significant return on investment. Scores on representative tests such as the National Assessment of Educational Progress were largely flat over that same time period, while graduation rates have fallen in some areas.

Do we see similar patterns in Wisconsin? WILL has previously looked at this question tangentially in "Truth in Spending," released in 2020. In that analysis, we found that only about 53% of spending is schools is classified as "Instruction." Administration is the next largest category, at about 23%. In this paper, we move to a much deeper analysis of the staffing data over the time frame of the 2016-17 school year to the 2021-22 school year.

Methods

Data was pulled from the Department of Public Instruction's "All Staff" Files housed on the Department's website.[v] The file includes a good deal of information about each employee of school districts around the state. Most critically for our analyses, it includes their position category, the share of that position compared to a full-time equivalent (FTE), and salary and benefit information. It is important to note that certain contracted services are not included in this list. For instance, school bus drivers in Wisconsin are hired under contracts with bus companies, and thus are not accounted for here.

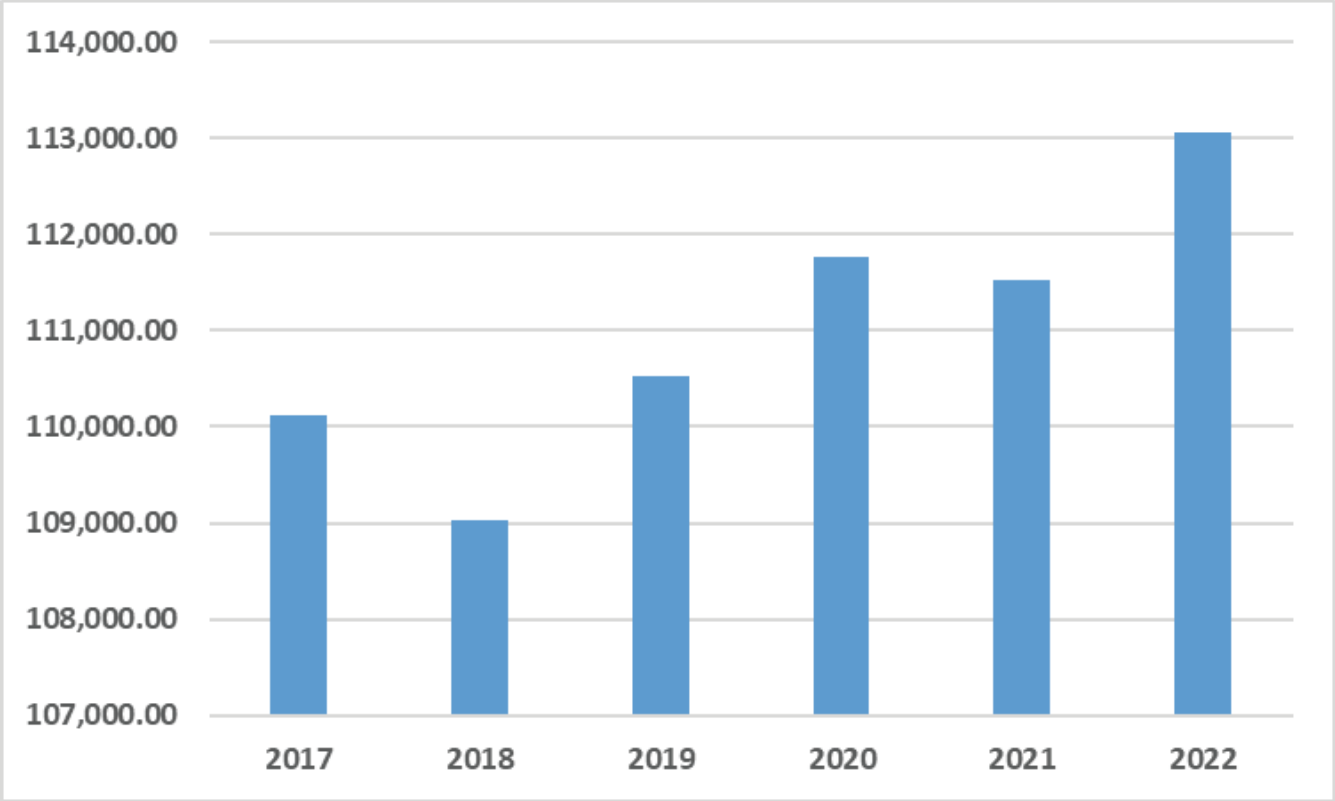
Many of the comparisons in the following analysis will be based on the percentage of FTEs in a district that are designated as Teachers. Not all other staff should be classified as "Administrators." Indeed, we will go through many of these designations in the report and what we have chosen to classify in that category.

We begin with a look at the overall picture of school staffing in the state. Figure 2 shows the total number of FTEs employed in the state each year beginning in 2017. Total staff as measured in FTEs has increased since 2017, going from about 110,000 to 113,000, an increase of 2.67%.

Staffing Overall in Wisconsin

We begin with a look at the overall picture of school staffing in the state. Figure 2 shows the total number of FTEs employed in the state each year beginning in 2017. Total staff as measured in FTEs has increased since 2017, going from about 110,000 to 113,000, an increase of 2.67%.

Figure 2. Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Overall Staff Count, Wisconsin



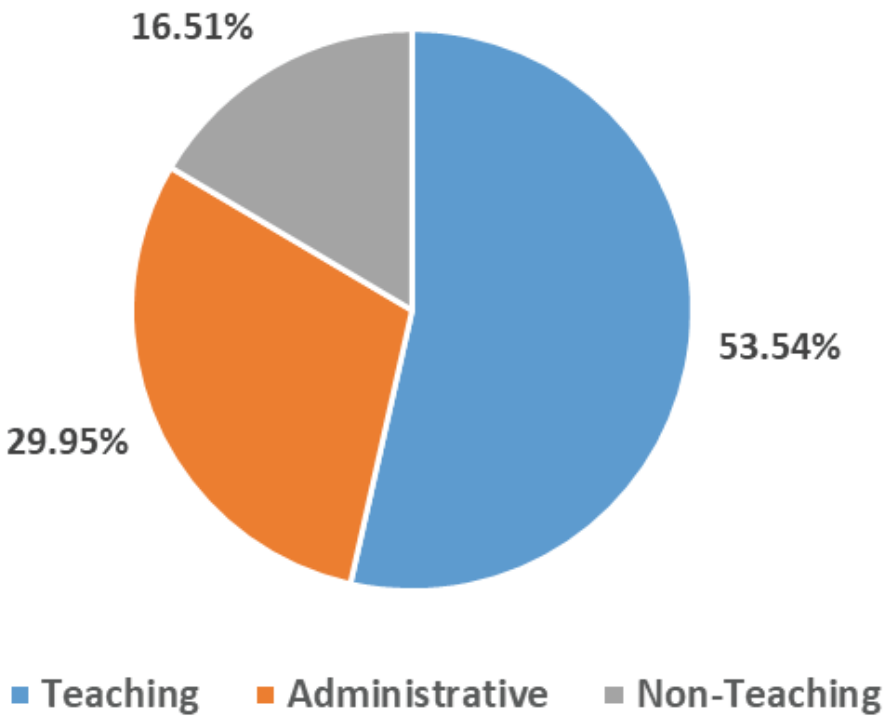
Given declining enrollment, the ratio of students to staff members has declined over that time frame. In 2017, there was a ratio of 7.85 students for each 1 staff member; in 2022, it was 7.33 students per staff member. The numbers, and the ratios, are shown for each year in Table 1.

Table 1. Total Staff FTEs, Enrollment & Student to Staff Ratio (2017-2022)

Year	Total Staff FTEs	Enrollment	Student/Staff Ratio
2017	110,109.31	863,811	7.85
2018	109,025.36	860,138	7.89
2019	110,533.06	858,833	7.77
2020	111,760.43	854,959	7.65
2021	111,517.75	829,935	7.44
2022	113,052.97	829,143	7.33

Figure 3 provides a breakdown of staffing into three buckets: administrative, non-teaching, and teaching. Non-teaching staff in this paper are defined as non-teaching roles that are still likely to regularly interact with students as part of their job, such as teacher's aides or nurses. Teachers make up approximately 53.5% of FTEs, with administrative positions taking up approximately 30%.

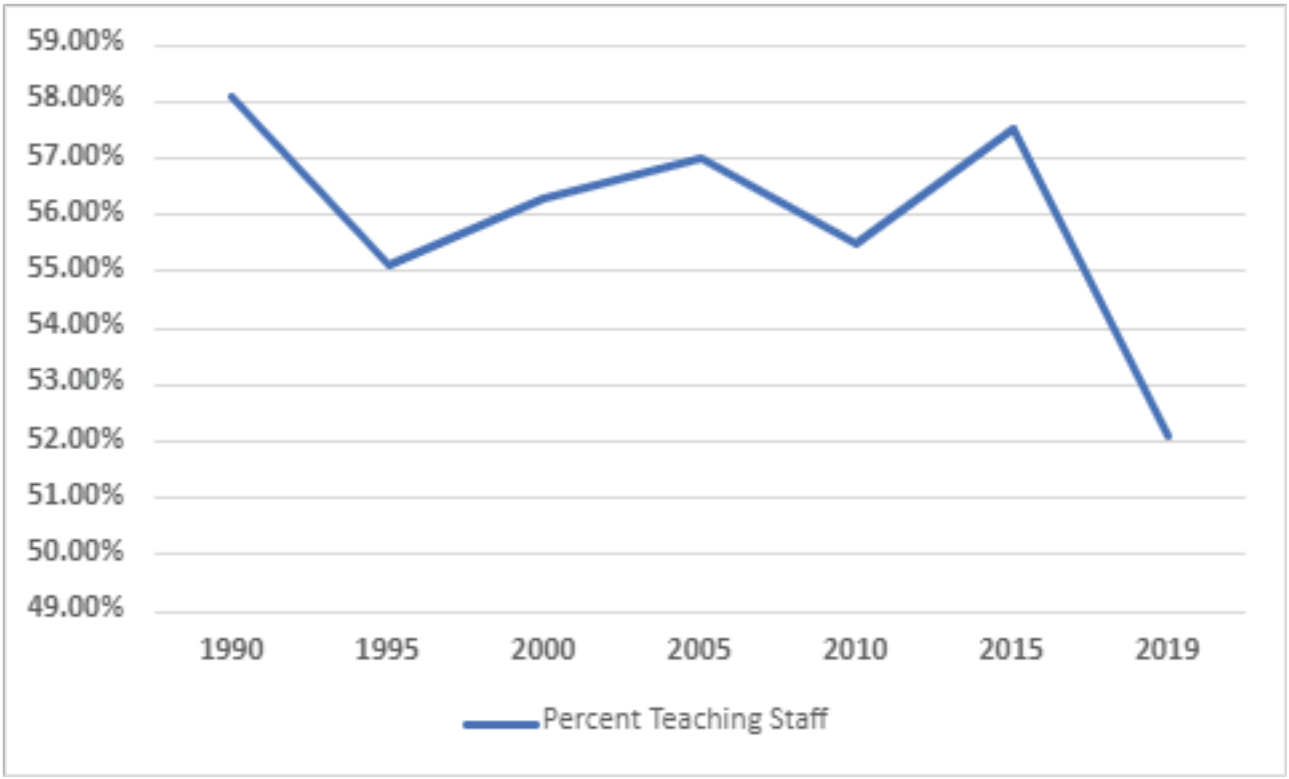
Figure 3. FTEs by Position Type



Teaching Staff

We can expand the years under consideration thanks to data from the National Center for Education Statistics.[vi] That data shows that in Wisconsin, since 1990, the share of teachers relative to staff as a whole has declined from about 58.1% to just 52.1%. The percentage of teachers in the state is shown by the line in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Teaching Positions, Wisconsin



The actual number of teaching FTEs has increased slightly in recent years—from 59,152 in 2017 to 60,555 in 2022. Because the number of students in Wisconsin's public schools has fallen during this time, student/teacher ratios have declined by nearly a whole student. Indeed, because the enrollment has only gone down every year for the past several years, the ratio has also decreased every year; this is all visible in Table 2.

Table 2. Total Teaching FTEs, Enrollment, and Ratio over Time

Year	FTEs	Enrollment	Student/Teacher Ratio
2017	59,152.63	863,811	14.60
2018	58,753.64	860,138	14.47
2019	59,644.31	858,833	14.40
2020	59,955.02	854,959	14.26
2021	60,268.32	829,935	13.77
2022	60,555.51	829,143	13.67

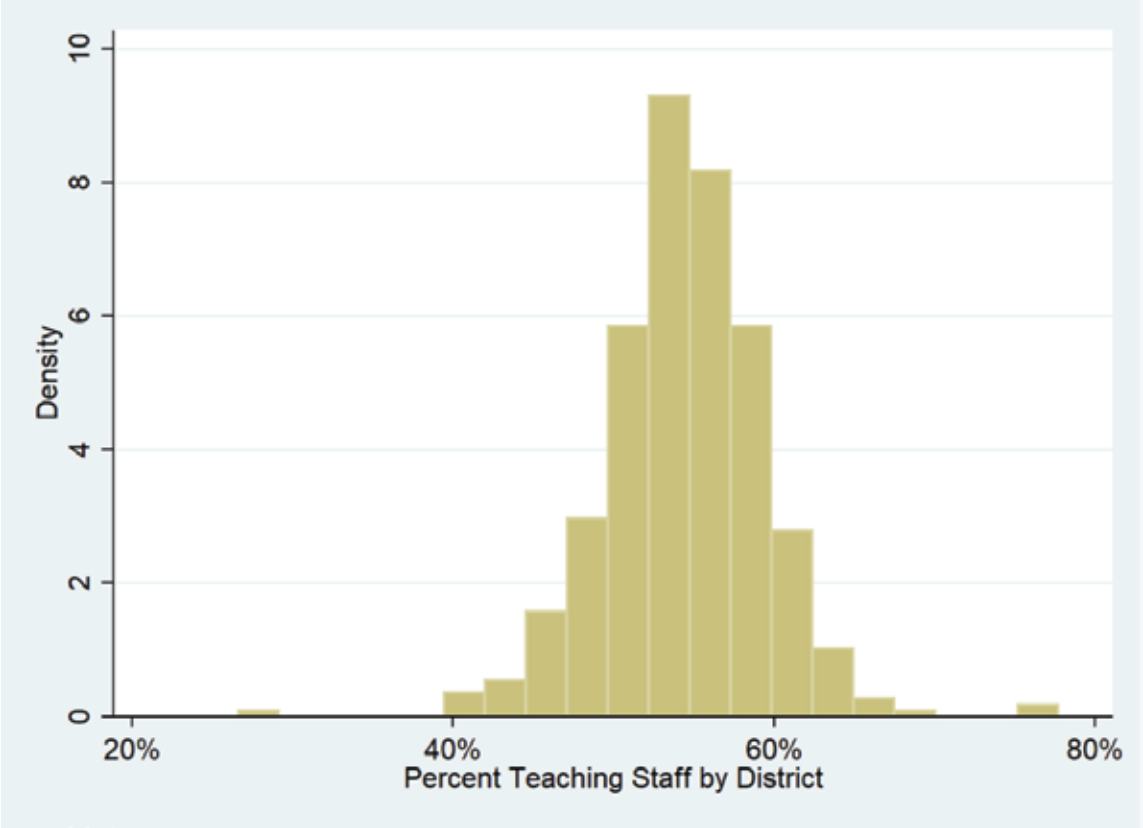
The share of staff that are teachers varies quite a bit by district. Table 3 shows the percentage of teachers in the ten districts with the highest and lowest percentages. We note that Milwaukee just missed the low end of the list here at 46.5%. Norris was not included due to special circumstances.1 (Keep in mind that not all of the non-teaching staff are administrative—that analysis will come further on in the paper.)

Table 3. Teaching Staff Percentage by District: 10 Highest and 10 Lowest Percentages

District	% Teachers	District	% Teachers
Frederic	39.95%	Shawano	77.76%
Glenwood City	40.96%	Randall J1	75.54%
Lakeland UHS	41.73%	Hurley	69.31%
Winter	41.86%	Kimberly Area	66.75%
White Lake	42.12%	Kohler	66.05%
Maple	43.26%	Owen-Withee	65.84%
Granton Area	43.27%	Kaukauna Area	64.87%
Greenwood	43.45%	Freedom Area	64.61%
Montello	43.54%	West Allis-West Milwaukee	64.29%
Cambria-Friesland	44.40%	Williams Bay	64.01%

Figure 5 presents a histogram of the percentage of teaching staff by district. The average district has about 54% teaching staff, but there is wide variation around that mean.

Figure 5. Percentage of Teaching Staff by District



Teacher Education

The staffing file also contains information on the level of educational attainment for Wisconsin educators. One pathway for teachers to increase their pay is to earn a Master's Degree. In Wisconsin, on average, teachers with a Master's Degree earn about $14,000 more per year than teachers without one.

Table 4. Average Annual Salary
Bachelor's vs. Master's-Level Wisconsin Teachers in 2021

Degree	Average Pay
Bachelor's	$51,677
Master's	$65,551
Gap	+ $13,874

This is a substantial gap in pay—representing a meaningful cost to Wisconsin taxpayers. And it is not as if having a Master's is rare in Wisconsin. Throughout the state, on average, 39.4% of teachers have attained the degree. Like other categories we have examined in this research, the percentage of teachers with a Master's varies a lot across the state. Table 5 shows the 10 districts with the highest and lowest percentages of such teachers.
Perhaps not surprisingly, a number of high school-only districts appear with the highest percentages. More surprising is the fact that some elementary-only districts appear at the top as well, such as Lake Geneva J1.

Table 5. Percentage of Teachers with a Masters by District

District	% Master's	District	% Master's
Wausaukee	3.00%	Arrowhead High	85.81%
Plum City	5.59%	Lake Geneva J1	78.15%
Dover #1	7.68%	Burlington Area	74.49%
Sharon	9.81%	La Crosse	74.06%
La Farge	10.60%	Lake Geneva-Genoa City UHS	70.09%
Neillsville	10.67%	Port Washington-Saukville	69.62%
Clayton	11.15%	Seymour Community	69.20%
Marion	12.01%	Superior	68.85%
Solon Springs	12.79%	Nicolet High	68.78%
New Auburn	12.92%	Swallow	68.54%

Perhaps these districts are making a worthwhile investment if employing teachers with Master's Degrees actually improves student outcomes. So, what does the data tell us? In Table 6, we undertake a regression analysis including the percentage of teachers with a Master's in every district, along with other common variables known to have a correlation to student outcomes. Here, we utilize the fullest dataset available from DPI from the 2020-21 school year.

The results are, in general, consistent with what we find in our annual Apples to Apples studies. Schools with more African American, Hispanic, and low-income students have lower proficiency, while school districts that serve only grades K-8 tend to have higher outcomes. But our variable of interest here, the percent of teachers with a Master's Degree, is insignificant for both math and ELA proficiency.

Table 6. Relationship Between Teacher Attainment & Student Proficiency

VARIABLES	(1) Math Proficiency	(2) ELA Proficiency
Percent with Master's	0.0180	-0.0128
	(0.0264)	(0.0213)
Percent Black	-0.295***	-0.0856
	(0.106)	(0.0850)
Percent Hispanic	-0.282***	-0.209**
	(0.107)	(0.0862)
Percent ELL	0.345*	0.263*
	(0.184)	(0.148)
Percent Low Income	-0.509***	-0.454***
	(0.0252)	(0.0203)
Enrollment (1000s)	0.00178	0.000863
	(0.00117)	(0.000939)
K-8 District	0.0704***	0.0604***
	(0.0139)	(0.0112)
Constant	0.589***	0.587***
	(0.0151)	(0.0122)
Observations	418	418
R-squared	0.598	0.636

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

This is consistent with research from around the country, which generally finds Master's Degrees have little relationship to student outcomes.[viii] In light of these findings, one must question whether alternative metrics could be used to determine which teachers deserve a raise. These could include performance incentives where teachers are paid more when students do well, or assessments of actual teaching quality by administrators. Since Act 10, districts have had freedom to implement systems like this in their own jurisdiction. A 2018 WILL study,[ix] for example, found that a number of districts have implemented merit pay once teacher pay was no longer collectively bargained.

Percentage of Teaching Staff

On average, teachers throughout the state make $58,237 per year. On average, non-teaching staff make $67,006 per year. When we exclude superintendents, this only drops by about $1,000 to $66,069 per year. At this level, non-teaching staff make $7,832 on average more than teaching staff. At a time when schools across the state are struggling to hire teachers, this trend should be concerning.

What are the factors that predict having more or less teaching staff? To answer that question, we conducted a regression analysis using data on every district in the state of Wisconsin. The results of that analysis are included in Table 7.

Table 7. Correlates of Higher Percentage Teaching Staff

VARIABLES	Percent Teaching Staff
Spending ($1000s)	-0.313***
	(0.102)
Enrollment (1000s)	-0.0532
	(0.0704)
Percentage with Disabilities	-2.268
	(8.675)
Percentage Low Income	-3.512*
	(1.888)
Percentage African American	0.576
	(6.382)
Percentage Share Hispanic	3.813
	(3.091)
Constant	61.07***
	(1.732)
Observations	418
R-squared	0.043

Standard errors in parentheses
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

It appears that when districts have more money, they tend to allocate it towards non-teaching staff. A $1,000 increase in spending per student leads to a decrease of 0.3% in the share of teachers in the district. This effect is small, but strongly statistically significant ($p<.01$). Another variable that appears important here is the share of low-income students. Moving from a hypothetical district with no low-income students to one where all students are low-income, we would expect to see a decrease in the share of teachers by 3.5%. No other factors in our model show up as significant, indicating that a lot of the variation in the share of teachers is random.

What Positions are Growing?

What positions have grown the most in the past six years? The top five are listed in the table below. Of most interest are the Social-Emotional Behavioral Interventions/Support (SEBIS) category and Directors of Human Relations/Multicultural Education/Equity. These positions scarcely existed in 2017, but now exist in many school districts. SEBIS has grown from 0 to 132 FTEs over the past six years. Also noteworthy is the increase in Multicultural/Equity Staff, which has nearly doubled (a 93% increase) just since 2017. Of course, this still only represents 15.5 FTEs.

Table 8. Percentage Increase in FTEs by Position, 2017-2022

Position	% Increase
56 - Social-Emotional Behavioral Interventions/Support	∞
12 - CESA or Marathon CCDEB Staff – Administrative	∞
74 - DHS Staff	∞
43 - Short Term Substitute Teacher	∞
79 - Director of Human Relations/Multicultural Education/Equity	93.75%
91 - Library Media Supervisor	72.87%
73 - WSD or WCBVI Staff	68.94%
62 - Educational Interpreter	41.96%
93 - Career and Technical Education Coordinator	32.87%
50 - School Social Worker	31.29%

SEBIS in schools have been the subject of much controversy in recent years. Previous WILL research has found that the implementation of the softer discipline policies that are often integral to such programs yielded schools that are less safe, and where learning is more difficult.[x] The trend in staffing here supports the notion that school districts are increasingly implementing "woke" discipline policies, and are doing so to pursue ideological goals or as high-price-tag favors to aligned blocs of candidate employees, rather than to prioritize students' education (or at any rate, to prioritize students' education in a data-driven way).

The statewide increase in these positions in raw numbers (instead of in percentages) looks somewhat different. These results are depicted in Table 9. Using this metric, the number of teaching FTEs has increased the most, followed by "Paraprofessionals" and the ambiguously titled "Other Professional Staff."

Table 9. Raw Increase in FTEs by Position, 2017-2022

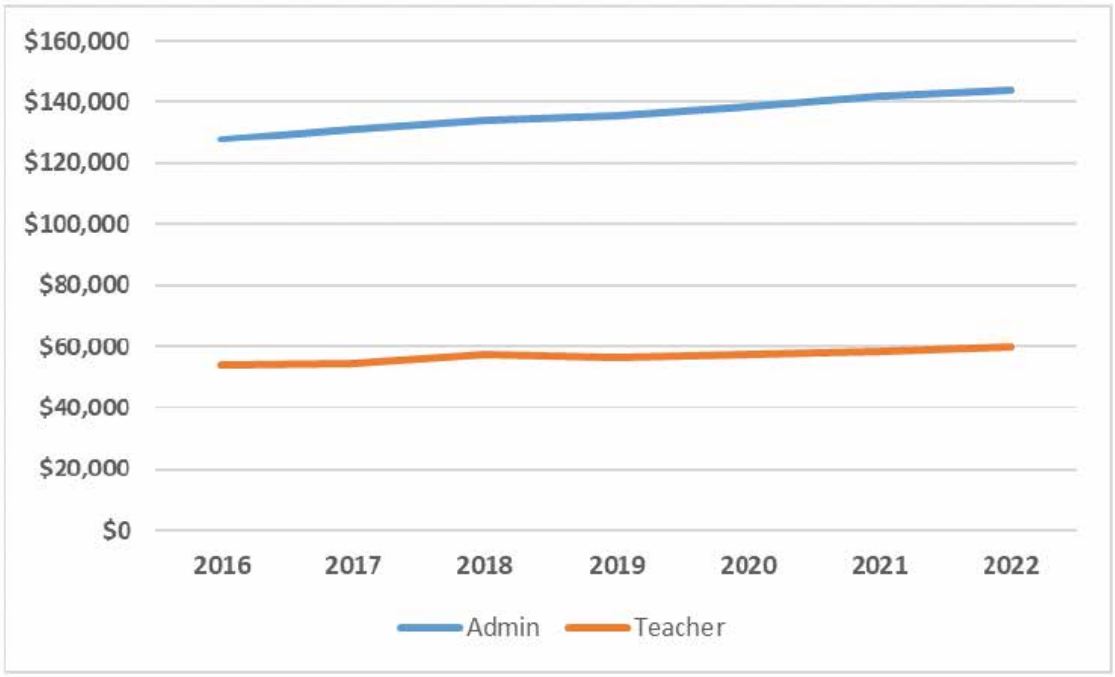
Position	Increase
Teacher	1372.98
Paraprofessional	1213.27
Other Professional Staff in a Non-Instructional role	442.58
School Counselor	204.25
School Social Worker	176.66

Table 10 below compares the salary of teaching staff to all other staff in Wisconsin's school districts. Because we might expect superintendents to earn significantly more and skew the results, a third line is added that excludes those.

Table 10. Salary by Position

Job Type	Average Salary
Teaching	$58,237
Non-Teaching	$67,006
Non-teaching Excluding District Administrators	$66,069

When District Administrators are considered, there was substantial growth in the gap over the past several years. The Figure below compares District Administrator pay with teacher pay since 2016. The gap between Administrator pay and teacher pay has expanded by nearly $10,000 ($9,767) over the last seven years.

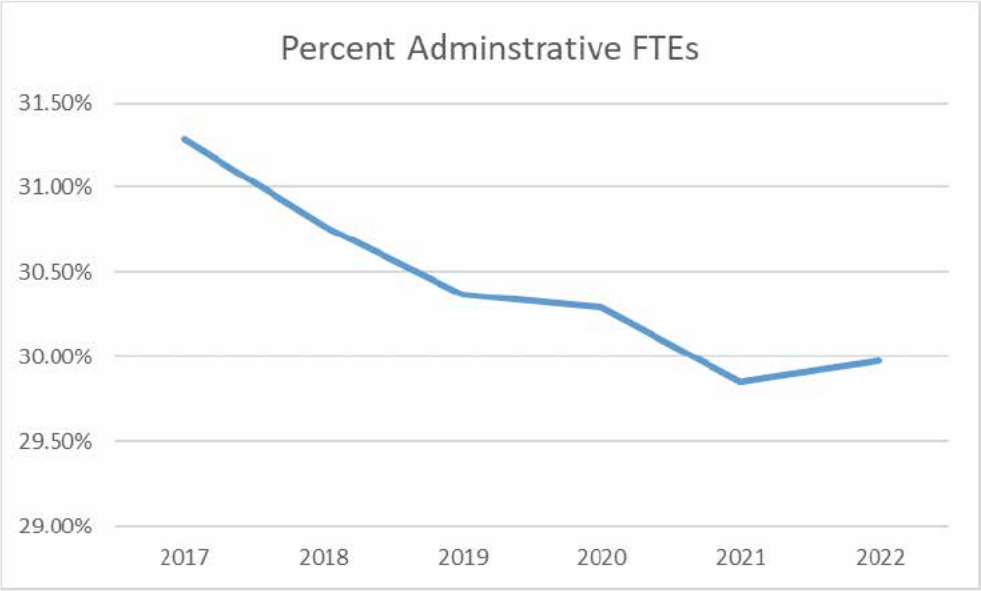


Administrative Staff

Exactly what categories fit under the label "Administrative" is somewhat subjective. It cannot simply be defined as all non-teachers, as that would encompass a number of staff members who interact with students on a regular basis, such as Reading Specialists and School Nurses. For this report, we have attempted to classify "administrative" staff as those individuals who would not likely interact with students on a regular basis. The appendix to this study includes the list of DPI's standardized job titles that we considered "administrative."

Figure 5 presents the percentage of staff in largely administrative roles for each year since 2017. The most important thing to note here is the relative stability of administrative staffing over this time frame, as the range of this chart only covers about 2.5 percentage points. Nonetheless, the share of administrative staffing has dropped slightly in this time frame. In 2017, the share of administrative staff stood at 31.28%. By 2022, this had dropped to 29.97%. This represented a very slight increase from 2021, where administrative staffing reached its low of 29.85% of FTEs.

Figure 5. Administrative FTEs Over Time



While the general trend here is positive, a key takeaway is that individuals who rarely interact with students still represent approximately 30% of staffing in Wisconsin schools. Just like with non-teaching staff in its entirety, the percentage of administrative staff varies widely by school district. Table 11 shows the ten districts with the highest and lowest percentages of staff in administrative roles.

Table 11. Percent Administrators by District

District	% Admin	District	% Admin
Gibraltar Area	47.19%	Shawano	7.92%
Superior	46.32%	Randall J1	10.85%
Mineral Point Unified	45.57%	Norris	13.91%
Solon Springs	45.50%	Kaukauna Area	13.91%
Sevastopol	45.34%	Kimberly Area	16.89%
Frederic	45.07%	Minocqua J1	18.14%
North Lakeland	44.44%	Oshkosh Area	18.41%
Menominee Indian	44.43%	Freedom Area	18.49%
Wisconsin Heights	44.21%	Oak Creek-Franklin Joint	19.22%
Winter	43.67%	Port Washington-Saukville	19.50%

One may note the prevalence of rural districts in the districts with the highest share of administrators. While we can only offer speculation here, it seems reasonable to assume that necessary administrative positions—such as the District Administrators—take up a larger percentage of the total staff in districts with smaller numbers of overall employees.


Woke
positions
destroy
our
childrens
education.
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Conclusion

Exactly what mix of teaching versus non-teaching staff is proper for any particular school district is beyond the scope of this paper. But the reality painted here is that education in Wisconsin has become heavily bureaucratic, and the number of middle men between the teacher-parent-student nexus has never been greater.

For teachers who are concerned about their pay, the lesson here is that they might consider turning their attention away from asking for more funding from the state, and towards their own districts to ask where exactly money is being spent rather than on them. For taxpayers, the lesson is much the same: the next time a local school district lobbies the legislature for more funding, or places a referendum on the ballot, demand that they account first for spending on things like Social/Emotional Support staff.

We focus on the local level because it is challenging for policymakers at the state level to be fully in touch with the varying needs of local districts. But state-level policymakers should be concerned about districts with outlier levels of spending on administration, and shouldn't be afraid to call spending choices into question when being lobbied for yet another increase in state aid.

Appendix. Classification of Administrative Positions

Position Code	Job Title
05	District Administrator
06	Assistant District Administrator
08	Business Manager
09	Subject Coordinator
10	Director of Instruction
12	CESA or Marathon CCDEB Staff
18	Department Head
56	Social/Emotional Behavioral Interventions
63	School Occupational Therapy
64	Program Coordinator
74	DHS Staff
79	Director of Human Relations
80	Director of Special Education
83	Assistant Director of Special Education
87	Library Media Specialist
88	Instructional Technology Integration
90	Central Office Administrator
91	Library Media Supervisor
92	Director Instructional Technology
97	Program Aide
98	Other Support Staff
99	Other professional staff in non-teaching positions

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330 East Kilbourn Ave. | Suite 725
Milwaukee, WI 53202

will-law.org
414-727-9455

@WILawLiberty