

# IN CASE OF EMERGENCY: MORE SCHOOLS TURN TO SHORT-TERM LICENSES

*In just the past decade, the number of emergency teaching licenses in Wisconsin has nearly tripled, suggesting schools are facing increasing challenges from staff shortages and high turnover in areas such as special education. Often emergency licenses are reissued for multiple years, which may lead policymakers to consider whether districts' use of licenses still aligns with their original purpose.*

In the 2021-22 school year, the state Department of Public Instruction (DPI) issued 3,197 emergency licenses to teach in Wisconsin. This is an increase of 2,072 licenses, or 184.2%, over 2012-13, when 1,125 emergency licenses were issued (see Figure 1).

In addition, the number of emergency license holders rose to a new high of 2,854 in 2021-22 (which we refer to as 2022), up from 2,794 the prior year and 1,076 in 2013. (Some individuals hold more than one emergency license.)

For 2019 and beyond, the number of emergency licenses and license holders is actually higher than these reported counts. Since 2018, DPI has offered a three-year emergency license and only includes the license in its reported count for the year of its original issuance. In addition, we removed apparent duplicates from the dataset including 575 licenses in 2021 that were attributed to both the Milwaukee Public Schools and St. Charles Youth & Family Services.

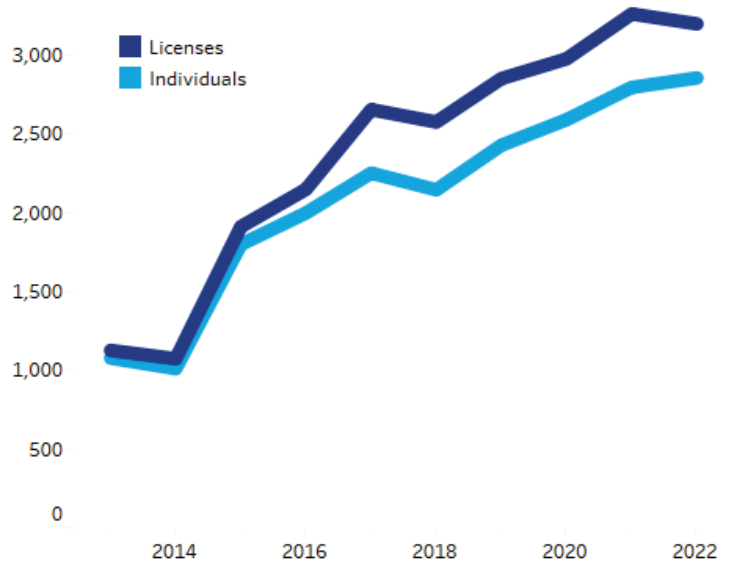
Although most emergency licenses are employed in urban and rural districts, the increase in their use has happened in schools across the state. From 2013 to 2022, 103 additional districts took up the use of emergency certifications. Here, we explore this trend and consider what it says about broader labor challenges within districts as well as whether these licenses are being used for their intended purposes.

## WHY ISSUE EMERGENCY LICENSES?

When school districts in Wisconsin cannot find a teacher licensed by DPI to fill a certain position, they can hire an unlicensed individual who then applies for a

license with certain conditions or stipulations. This is commonly referred to as an emergency license, though it has had other official names in recent years such as a one-year permit, a one-year license, and a permit with stipulations. The licenses also can be used by counselors, social workers, librarians, and school administrators. We refer to all of these temporary certifications from DPI as “emergency licenses.”

**Figure 1: Emergency Licenses Nearly Triple Over Decade**  
Number of emergency licenses and license holders



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Emergency licenses play an important role in staffing the state’s classrooms and may be used in a variety of scenarios, which are often short-term and sometimes urgent. Moreover, they can benefit both districts and teachers. For example, when teachers licensed in other states move to Wisconsin, they may need time to



complete coursework specific to this state, and an emergency license can help them to begin a new teaching job more quickly.

Individuals in alternative certification programs who have college degrees but need classroom experience are also common applicants for emergency licenses. Another possible scenario is when a district employee transitions to a position for which he or she is not yet certified. For example, an elementary school teacher may obtain an emergency license to become a reading teacher, or a teacher may take on a counselor role. An emergency license may also be used in a temporary scenario, such as a high school biology teacher covering a section of chemistry for one year for scheduling reasons.

As these scenarios illustrate, the use of emergency licenses does not necessarily indicate a problem in a district. However, the rapid growth in emergency certifications raises questions about whether workforce challenges have grown for districts, whether the use of emergency licenses has outgrown their original purpose, and whether other solutions should be considered.

In this report, “district” refers to any entity charged with educating students from kindergarten through high school. Most often, that is a public school district, but it also includes private schools and charter schools as well as other entities such as inpatient treatment providers and the Wisconsin Department of Corrections.

### RISING NUMBER OF DISTRICTS USING EMERGENCY LICENSES

Alongside the increase in licenses and license holders in the past decade, the number of districts employing teachers with emergency licenses also rose, from 303 districts in 2013 to 406 districts in 2022, thus constituting a majority of the state’s public school districts. This trend is consistent with rising workforce challenges for districts.

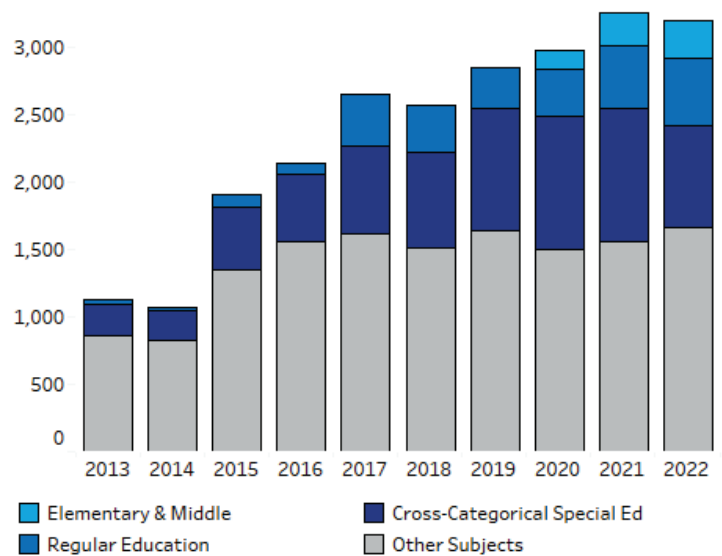
As the use of emergency licenses rose across the state, their growth and distribution has stayed fairly consistent across districts in different locales such as cities and rural areas. Over the past decade, urban schools have regularly accounted for about 42% of emergency licenses, suburban schools for 14%, town schools for 7%, and rural schools for 33%. (The other 4% are in districts with a combination of locales or none listed.)

This consistency indicates that workforce issues causing a rise in emergency licensures are not increasing disproportionately in certain geographic types of districts. However, as the numbers above show, some districts rely on emergency licenses more than others. In particular, when compared to the distribution of teaching positions in the state, the share of emergency licenses is disproportionately higher than expected for urban schools and lower than expected for suburban schools. Schools in towns and rural areas have slightly smaller than expected proportions of emergency licenses based on the number of positions in those districts.

### THREE LICENSE TYPES DRIVE INCREASE

Three subject areas were responsible for the majority (61.5%) of the increase in the number of emergency licenses (see Figure 2). Cross-Categorical Special Education led with the largest increase, growing by 525 licenses since 2013 to 761 in 2022 and accounting for about one-quarter (25.3%) of the total increase in emergency licenses. The Cross-Categorical license is required for teachers who work with students with disabilities who have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). In 2022, only 8.1% of all the teaching positions in Wisconsin were held by someone with this license, which means these positions are accounting for a disproportionately large share of the emergency certifications.

**Figure 2: Three License Types Account for Most of Increase**  
Distribution of emergency licenses by subject area



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



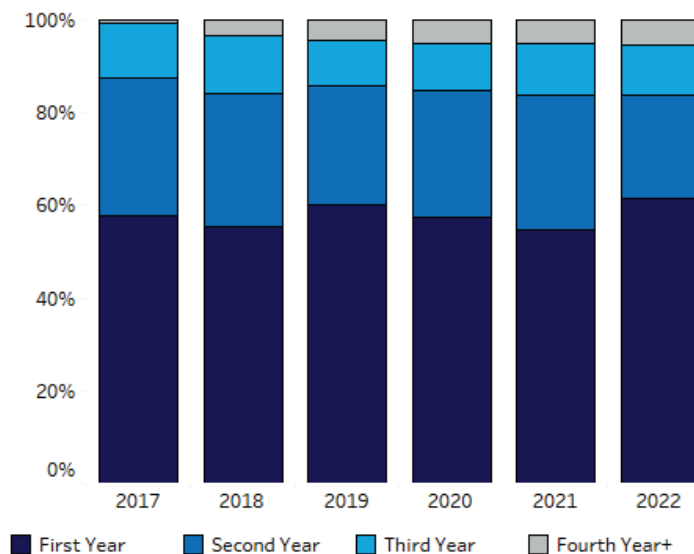
The next two largest increases in emergency licenses from 2013 to 2022 were for Regular Education and Elementary and Middle Education. Regular Education grew by 475 licenses, or 22.9% of the total increase, and Elementary and Middle Education rose by 275 licenses, or 13.3% of the total increase. Both of these licenses are used by teachers in elementary and middle school classrooms in which one person teaches a range of subjects. The Elementary and Middle Education license is a new category as of 2020.

These three license categories are intended to be used by career teachers for multiple years. The rise in their use suggests that a growing number of teachers are entering classrooms before they meet the requirements for a regular license. Special education in particular appears to be an area of shortage for districts, leading them to rely upon emergency licensures to fill positions.

### SOME LICENSES HELD FOR YEARS DESPITE PROGRAM INTENT

The data show a large number of teachers hold on to their emergency licenses for multiple years. The data for our research begins in 2013, so it takes until 2017 to identify the growing number of teachers who have held emergency licenses for multiple years (see Figure 3). Since 2017, about 30% of individuals with an emergency license held one in a previous year, and about 10% had emergency licenses in two previous years.

**Fig. 3: Many Teachers Hold Emergency Licenses for Years**  
Distribution of emergency license holders by years of use



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

A considerable portion of these teachers are obtaining emergency licenses for the same subject area in successive years. The program anticipates some repeat license holders in districts with limited staff, such as a high school where a social studies teacher gets an emergency certification in psychology for one year and then sociology in a later year. Yet, the majority of the repeated licenses are in the same subject area – many of them in Cross-Categorical Special Education and Regular Education. (Elementary and Middle Education is too new to know how many repeated license holders there will be.) This concentration suggests that districts and individuals are using emergency licenses for needs that extend beyond the short term. Policymakers may wish to track if emergency license holders are eventually converting to regular licenses and, if so, how long it is taking them to do so.

For licensed teachers who want to obtain a license in another subject area, DPI began offering a three-year license with stipulations in 2018. Its purpose is to provide established teachers with sufficient time to meet all of the requirements of a license in a new subject area. In 2022, there were 209 three-year licenses issued, which accounted for only 6.5% of all the emergency certifications approved that year. With many one-year license holders requesting renewals, DPI may wish to consider expanding the current three-year license program to capture more individuals who need more than a year to obtain a regular license.

### SHORT-TERM AND LONG-TERM OPPORTUNITIES

Districts have faced longstanding challenges filling classrooms with qualified staff, particularly in specialty subjects, but concerns about teacher shortages in Wisconsin have grown far more prevalent in recent years. The rise in emergency licenses substantiates these growing concerns by suggesting that districts are encountering greater difficulties in hiring enough teachers through the traditional routes, particularly in areas such as special education.

Emergency licenses also appear to increasingly provide an alternative process for training new teachers. Rather than completing an educational degree program and then obtaining a post, candidates are landing the job first and then obtaining the license and the education. Though there may be a need for this progression, it also



risks increasing the number of educators without formal training in their subject area.

The increase in emergency licenses is one factor for elected officials and policymakers to consider as they contemplate actions to address teacher shortages and debate broader issues such as school funding and the teacher pipeline. Addressing these larger challenges will take time, however. In the meantime, DPI already has a three-year license that attempts to balance education and training objectives with districts' and teachers' immediate needs, and that might be used more broadly.

In addition, the state and districts should work to ensure that new hires with no classroom experience receive meaningful mentorship and effective training. With proper support, the emergency license holders of today are more likely to remain in the profession and reduce the need for this approach in the future.

