The Causes and Consequences of Student Mobility

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Student mobility—students making nonpromotional school changes—is widespread in many schools and districts throughout the United States. Mobility not only can harm the students who change schools, it can also harm the classmates and teachers left behind. This article examines the incidence, causes, and consequences of student mobility in the United States. Research reveals that the causes and consequences of mobility are more complicated than many people assume. The final part of the article discusses what parents, schools, districts, and policymakers can do to address this growing educational problem.

There's been a lot of talk over the past few years about the need to improve student mobility in our schools. Some experts argue that high mobility rates are indicative of educational problems, while others believe that mobility is a natural part of the school experience. While there is no consensus on the issue, it is clear that mobility can have significant impacts on students, teachers, and schools.

Rumberger notes that mobility is a complex issue, with many factors contributing to it. For example, some students may move to be closer to family or friends, while others may be forced to move due to economic reasons. Regardless of the reasons, mobility can have negative effects on students, such as disrupting their educational progress and weakening their social connections.

In terms of consequences, mobility can have a range of effects on schools and districts. For example, high mobility rates can make it difficult for teachers to develop strong relationships with students, which can affect students' academic performance. Additionally, mobility can lead to increased teacher turnover, which can further disrupt the educational process.

Rumberger suggests that schools and districts can take steps to address student mobility by focusing on creating a stable and supportive learning environment. This may include providing consistent and supportive guidance, offering before-school and after-school programs, and involving parents in the educational process. By doing so, schools can help reduce the negative effects of mobility and create a more positive educational experience for all students.
September 1993 to September 1994, and only 6% remained in the same school over a two-year period (see Figure 8 of Bryk, Thum, Linn, & Lappin, 1996, for complete data). But there is considerable variation in the extent of student mobility among schools, even within the same district. In Chicago, 15% of the schools lose at least 30% of their students from one year to the next, while only 15% of the schools retain more than 80% of their students from one year to the next (see Table 1 of Kao, 1996, for complete data). Among schools in the 77th high school attendance area, an average of 22% of the 10th grade students left before completing 12th grade, but mobility rates varied from an average of 16% to a high of almost 30% (see Table 2 of Rumringer & Thomas, 2000, for complete data).

**The Impact of Mobility on Students**

Existing research finds that students can suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from mobility. Mobile students face the psychological challenge of coping with a new school environment (Holland, Kaplan, & Davis, 1974). One high school student interviewed in a comprehensive study of student mobility we conducted in California commented on the challenge of mobility: "Moving and changing schools really challenged my personality. I felt like there were too many little things I didn't know about all the different schools and I felt at-one with all the time. There's no guarantee, I just always feel like I'm changing, it's psychological, really... basically, I never feel like a complete person. That's how I feel whenever I try to remember last year and the impressions. Rumringer et al., p. 15.

Mobile students also face the social adjustment to new peers and social expectations (Schaller, 1975). As another student in our California mobility study reported: "It's hard to change schools. It's hard because I'm not the type of person to make friends and cool up, Rumringer et al., 1994, p. 28.

Research has demonstrated that mobility is related to misbehavior and youth violence. Two studies based on national health surveys found that children in families who moved frequently were more likely to experience a number of psychological and behavioral problems compared to families who did not move or moved infrequently (Shumaker & Powls, 1994; Wood, Hagan, Scarf, Nowacki, & Neumark, 1988). Another national study of high school students found that, after controlling for educational and family background characteristics, mobility during the first two years of high school had a significant effect on behavior problems, but changing schools during the last two years of high school increased behavior problems (Farvardin & Schneider, 1999). A longitudinal study that tracked 4,200 adolescents in California and Oregon from seventh grade through high school found that repeated elementary school changes were related to reduced academic achievement (Bryk et al., 2000). Studies have also found that mobile high school students are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Meyers, 1999, Rumringer et al., 1999).

Finally, mobility can hurt students academically. Numerous studies have examined the impact of mobility on academic achievement in both elementary and secondary school. A variety of achievement measures have been employed in these studies, including test scores, grades, retention, and high school completion. As with all research studies, there are limitations to what these studies tell us. First, studies based on data from local districts may not apply to other districts. Second, because mobile students may have nonstandard and family problems that contribute to their mobility, it is important to test for mobility and control for these characteristics in order to determine whether mobility itself is the cause of subsequent achievement and other problems in schools. Of course, the ability to control for these characteristics depends upon the data that are used in the study. Even with these limitations, the research evidence suggests that mobility hurts academic achievement in some situations, not in others. Data that do not control for background characteristics of students show that mobile students have lower achievement than non-mobile students (Anders, Altemeyer, & Wender, 1990; Forsgren, Stamm, & Bickel, 1969). One national study of third-grade students found that frequent school changes were associated with a host of problems, including nutrition and health deficiencies, below grade-level reading scores, and grade retention (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1998).

Yet, studies that take background differences into account find that mobility may be more of an asymptote than a separate of poor school performance. One study of mobile students in Chicago found that half of the achievement differences between mobile and stable students could be attributed to differences between students who predicted school changes (Temple & Reynolds, 1999). One well-designed study of elementary school students in Baltimore found that although mobility during elementary school had a negative association with test scores, grades, retention, and retention to special education in fifth grade.
The association was largely insignificant once controls were introduced for the family and academic performance in first grade (Alexander, Kremer, & Dorado, 1996). In other words, mobile students came from poorer families and had lower academic performance before they were classified as mobile. Other studies (Herstein & Stith, 2000; Haskins, 1998; Bell, 1994; Nelson et al., 1996). Yet even this conclusion must be viewed with another observation. These findings are consistent with the Baltimore study—that middle-class White students with high academic performance in first grade were no less likely to drop out of high school than those with low academic performance.

These findings reveal two very different migration streams, distinguished by their destinations. It is the relative socioeconomic status of the student's family that determines whether the student moves (lower or more predictable grade retention), but the few moves that do not happen (Highland & Fawcett, 1994; Wood et al., 1993). Yet, another study based on the same data found that even one residential move had a negative impact on a composite measure of both academic and behavioral aspects of school performance, but that the negative association was found only among children who did not live with both biological parents (Tucker, Marx, & Long, 1998). The authors suggested that two-parent families may have more rules as "social capital"—a concept developed by sociologists James Coleman (1988) to characterize the quality of the relationships parents have with their children—that can help mitigate the effects of residential mobility.

At the secondary school level, several additional studies have examined the impact of mobility on two indicators of student performance—test scores and high school graduation. The impact of mobility on secondary school test scores appears to be mixed. One study of 1,293 eighth-grade English language learners in a large urban district found that after controlling for other student and classroom characteristics, mobile students had significantly lower test scores (Hedlund, 1999). Another study of 30,000 sixth- and eighth-grade students in Chicago found that, even after controlling for the prior year's test scores and other background characteristics, mobile students had significantly lower test scores (Lee & Smith, 1999). Two other studies, based on the same national longitudinal survey of eighth graders who were tracked for six years, found that the impact of mobility was sometimes negative and sometimes positive. The two studies examined the impact of both residential and school changes on test scores and controlled for prior test scores and family background. One study found that changing both school and residential addresses during high school reduced 12th grade test scores in reading and mathematics, but that changing school alone was not associated with reduced test scores (Douglas, 1999). The authors concluded that the impact of mobility during the last two years of high school, which includes residential and school changes, compared the impact of mobility during the first two years of high school (Teachman, Phillips, & Carter, 1999). As noted above, even the last two years of high school had a strong negative impact on 12th grade math scores (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Indeed, however, even residential and school changes actually improved later test scores. This suggests that the timing of mobility matters. The most recent study was done for the California study of mobility, in which some students moved to "strategic" schools to improve their educational prospects, while others who moved to "strategic" schools were forced to get out of poor schools.

The strongest evidence that mobility during high school diminishes the prospects for graduation. One study that examined the relationship between residential mobility and high school completion for a cohort of children who were tracked from early childhood to young adulthood found that, after controlling for a variety of family background variables, mobility reduced the odds of high school graduation (Blau & Wolfe, 1994). Several studies have examined the impact of student mobility on dropping out of school, based on the same national longitudinal survey of eighth graders mentioned above. These studies found that school mobility between 8th and 10th grades, as well as mobility between 1st and 8th grades, increased the odds of dropping out of school by 12th grade (Ramnberger & Lott, 1996). The study of student mobility and residential changes at 8th and 12th grade reduced the odds of graduating from high school for 8th graders and for 12th graders, with even one school change during high school reduced the odds of graduating from high school by more than 50%. The other study found that residential changes between 8th and 10th grades increased the odds of dropping out of 10th grade by 12th grade; early school changes decreased the odds of dropping out. This suggests negatively on some students, but may have a positive impact on others.

The impact of mobility on schools

Mobility not only affects those who change schools, it impacts classrooms and schools that most deal with mobile students. It can also adversely impact non-mobile students. Our California study found that average test scores for non-mobile students were significantly lower in schools that had high student mobility rates (Ramnberger et al., 1999). Another study found that students in schools with high turnover suffer academically (Haskins, Kam, & Jankin, 2001). The impact of mobility on student performance is not lost on school personnel, who point out the problems it can create for school accountability.

As you know, we got tested at the end of the year, and you know, it's assumed that the people we lost at the 10th grade were the ones that were at 10th grade and if the scores go up, it doesn't mean that it's a better way or more stringent. We're not doing longitudinal studies with the same kids in a school. I mean, we're not going to say: "Oh, 50 or 60% of the kids who are in one year, are staying out of the school in the next year." (Haskins et al., 1999, pp. 56-57.)

In our California study, school personnel characterized the overall effects of mobility on student mobility at the school level as a "chaos" factor that impacts classroom management, teacher morale, and administrative function—all of which can impact the learning and achievement of all students in the school. Teachers are frustrated and difficult to it teach in classrooms with constant student turnover. It is particularly disruptive in doing group work, as one high school teacher pointed out: "We start a project, and prepare the impact by putting them in the appropriate groups. When a kid leaves in the middle, we have to adjust the whole group again. It is very time-consuming. Otherwise, you lose momentum in what you are doing. It takes a lot of time to teach the rules and routines and figure out how you're going to do it." (Ramnberger et al., 1999, pp. 42-43.)
...simultaneously, a Chicago study found that the pace of instruction was slower in schools with high rates of student mobility. Smith, & Bryk, 1996. This study indicates that when students change schools when they enter and when they leave. At one high school counselor pointed out: "It is so easy to get them to transfer, "they just want to change schools, ..."You get to see in the name, Migrantilee. Title 1 students..." We asked a second group of 20 parents whose children were... Rumpler & Lanuza, 1996. Beyond the administrative costs, school personnel also identified... impacts such as... (2012). Beyond the administrative costs, school personnel also identified... (Ferber, 1999). In the study of student mobility, in Chicago... the data base in this one. One national study found that 79% of all school changes... in 2001. In a study of student mobility in Chicago... in residential changes... (Ferber, 1999). But widths, large urban schools, which enroll data indicate have... mobility, and 12% were accompanied by a change of residence. (see Table 2 of... Rumberger & Lanuza, 1999, for complete data). In a study of student mobility in Chicago, more than 40% of school changes among sixth graders were due to residential changes... (Ferber, 1999, p. 214). But within large urban schools, which enroll... students who migrated through the system. Thus, the educational process may be impaired and the consequences of student mobility may extend beyond the school building. (Rumberger & Lanuza, 1999, p. 4). While mobility may be often associated with residential moves, there are many reasons why student mobility is a serious problem. In our California study, however, 32% of students who changing schools over the previous two years reported each of these reasons for changing schools. In the study of student mobility in Chicago... in residential areas. The findings of previous studies... (Ferber, 1999). While mobility may be often associated with residential moves, there are many reasons why student mobility is a serious problem. In our California study, however, 32% of students who changing schools over the previous two years reported each of these reasons for changing schools. In the study of student mobility in Chicago... in residential areas. The findings of previous studies... (Ferber, 1999). While mobility may be often associated with residential moves, there are many reasons why student mobility is a serious problem. In our California study, however, 32% of students who changing schools over the previous two years reported each of these reasons for changing schools. In the study of student mobility in Chicago... in residential areas. The findings of previous studies... (Ferber, 1999). While mobility may be often associated with residential moves, there are many reasons why student mobility is a serious problem. In our California study, however, 32% of students who changing schools over the previous two years reported each of these reasons for changing schools. In the study of student mobility in Chicago... in residential areas. The findings of previous studies... (Ferber, 1999). While mobility may be often associated with residential moves, there are many reasons why student mobility is a serious problem. In our California study, however, 32% of students who changing schools over the previous two years reported each of these reasons for changing schools. In the study of student mobility in Chicago... in residential areas. The findings of previous studies... (Ferber, 1999).
they can find one with sufficient space, while overcrowding prompts schools to transfer students even if schools wanted to enroll them.

There are several reasons why mobility may negatively impact student achievement. Mobile students must adapt to new academic standards and expected classroom behaviors (Hafetz & et al., 1999). Students who attend school with peers in our California mobility study revealed some of the reasons why mobile students have trouble fitting in—they sometimes get behind in classwork and struggle to catch up in school completion or transition into work in classes where the curriculum differs from their previous school—a condition referred to as "curricular incoherence." (Rumberger et al., 1999).

But why do some students seem to be adversely affected by changing schools and others do not? Our California study found that the consequences of mobility depended on the reasons students changed schools. Students who were "struggling" who changed schools to seek a better educational placement, in general, reported positive academic impacts, while students who were "treading water" or in intolerable social or academic situations were more likely to report negative academic impacts from changing schools (Rumberger et al., 1999). The idea of strategic school changes is consistent with the finding that changes early in a student's high school career may not be harmful or can even be beneficial, while changes later in a student's high school career are generally harmful (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). On the other hand, mobility due to misbehavior or involuntary transfers is more likely to be harmful, especially if the change of schools fails to address the underlying problem that led to the transfer in the first place.

What Can Be Done? What can and should be done about student mobility? The answer to this question depends on how much mobility is considered harmful. If mobility is viewed largely as a strategic activity initiated by students and their families to serve their own interests and educational preferences, then any response to this issue should be directed toward them. And there may be little that can be done to prevent mobility when families choose or are forced to change jobs or residences. In this case, the only response is perhaps to better inform students and parents about the possible problems that can result from changing schools and how to mitigate them.

However, at least some mobility is strategic rather than related to moving. Rather, both students and schools initiate student transfers in response to economic as well as academic concerns. Moreover, there is substantial evidence that demonstrates how mobility can adversely affect student academic performance.

Consequently, much can and should be done both to prevent some types of mobility, especially reactive school changes, and to mitigate some of the harmful effects of mobility. Schools at districts, students and families, and state policymakers all can help address this problem.

What Schools Should Do Schools, like students and parents, can work to reduce unnecessary mobility and to mitigate its harmful effects. The most general, yet potentially the most effective, strategy to reduce mobility is to improve the overall quality of the school. By doing so, students and parents are more likely to remain at a school than to leave in search of a more suitable educational environment. Case studies have documented that schools that undertake substantial and meaningful reforms can dramatically reduce their student mobility rates. For example, in a three-year period (1987-90), Hollis Brookline High School in New Hampshire reduced its student mobility rate from 10% to 7% (McCarthy & Sidell, 1995, p. 82). Programs that target high-risk students—who are most likely to leave a school—have also been shown to dramatically reduce student mobility. An urban dropout prevention program reduced student turnover by one-half among the most at-risk Hispanic American students in a Los Angeles area middle school (Larson & Rumberger, 1995).

In addition to these large-scale efforts, schools can undertake some specific strategies to help address problems associated with mobility. Counselors, administrators, and other school staff can do a number of things:

1. They can counsel students to remain in the school if possible. Again, some school changes are unnecessary and detrimental. Said can "problem solving" with withdrawing students about how they could remain at least until the year-end—for example, how they can use public transportation or be tutored by a family member if they move out of the neighborhood.

2. They can prepare in advance for incoming transfer students. Schools can improve the transition and adjustment of new, incoming transfer students by planning materials and activities for such students before they arrive. This will not only aid students, but will help reduce the sudden demands that processing such students often require. Some specific activities that could be undertaken include:

   - Create extra sections of required courses at the beginning of the school year to accommodate the expected increase in transfer students throughout the year.
   - Make an orientation video about the school.
   - Develop a short assessment test for reading, writing, and computing as a way to determine which classes to assign the student to if the student does not bring a transcript.
   - Create and train a cadre of volunteer student leaders who can have experienced entering the school last.
   - Create interesting information packets about extracurricular activities.
   - Organize students to provide weekly ongoing information booths at lunch where they explain the various extracurricular activities and how to join them.
   - Facilitate the transition of incoming transfer students as early as they arrive. Schools can help to mitigate some of the harmful psychological, social, and academic impacts of student mobility. Some specific actions they can take are:

      - Get them to enroll in a class without credit to gain experience and then re-enroll for credit at the start of the semester or new year.
      - Assign a very late-arriving student to independent study where credit can be earned until the new semester begins or the year ends.
      - Encourage new students to join extracurricular activities or, if appropriate, a counseling group.
      - Make an appointment with transferring students to phone or come by one or two weeks after they arrive to discuss how things are going in the new school.

4. They can establish ongoing activities and procedures to address the needs of new students. These programs focus on adjusting to a new school can continue for a long time. Therefore, schools need long-term strategies to address these problems if they wish to be successful in engaging and retaining their new students. Some specific actions schools can take include:

      - Form a "new student" group to meet at lunch.
      - Provide after-hours (inviting or familiar) parent conferences.
      - Create referral procedures for new students who are showing adjustment problems.
      - Sponsor school-wide "acclimatization" contests or activities.
      - Ask staff and teachers to mentor a new student who might have difficulties academically or socially.
5. They can assess the post-enrollment history of incoming students, including the number of previous school changes, and closely monitor the educational progress of students with three or more previous school changes. Research shows that frequent school changes are particularly detrimental to students. Therefore, schools should routinely assess the post-enrollment history of incoming students in order to identify such students and target interventions for them. The enrollment history should also be used to identify other students as well, such as students who have been retained in earlier grades, since these factors also increase the risk of dropping out. Teachers, too, can help the transition and adjustment of new, incoming students in their classes. Like counselors and administrators, teachers can take actions before, during, and after the arrival of new students in their classes.

6. Teachers can contribute to the adjustment of incoming students. Teachers who know how to help students in their classes throughout the school year can progress in their arrival. This will help the students reduce the immediate demands of dealing with these students at the time of their arrival. Some specific activities that teachers can do include:
   - Develop learning plans that give important background information and activities of key units so that students can adjust in the middle of a unit can be given the packets at a catch-up.
   - Create and administer a subject matter skills assessment test.
   - Create and administer a reading comprehension and writing assessment test.
   - Create a personal information assessment or journal assignment. Develop a list of 10 to 10 personal questions that the student can answer in two pages. This will allow the teacher to know the student better but also provide a sample of writing skills.
   - Create a social list of class rules and routines for the class.

7. Teachers can facilitate the transition of new students as soon as they arrive. Just as counselors and administrators need to take action as soon as new students arrive, so should teachers. Some specific activities they can do include:
   - Assess the student.
   - Hand out the learning packet.
   - Introduce the entering student to the class.
   - Pair the student up with another student for extra help.
   - Take some time in the first day or two to talk to the student individually for encouragement and support.
   - During class (or as the student stays a few minutes after class) make an appointment at lunch or recreation time to greet the student and orient them to the class.
   - Introduce them to another student who entered late and is succeeding.

8. Teachers can establish ongoing activities and procedures to address the needs of new students. Teachers, too, need to develop ongoing procedures and practices to ensure the successful transition of new students to their classes. Some specific things they can do include:
   - Read the student’s record for grades, attendance, and background information.
   - Contact the parent(s) to inform them about the class and expectations, and take the time to discuss the problems of changing schools in the mid-year.
   - Provide tutoring or review before or after school or at lunch.
   - When teachers know that a student is behind, they can give him the first week to make sure he or she is on track or have the student sit up front.
   - Observe for signs that indicate the student is struggling with the classroom or having social or psychological adjustment problems. Refer to other professionals as necessary.

9. Schools should establish procedures to receive textbooks from withdrawing students. Schools with high student turnover often suffer financial losses from withdrawing students who fail to return their textbooks (Rumberger et al., 1999). Although schools may not be able to withhold transferring records from students who fail to return textbooks, schools and districts that are heavily impacted by mobility need to establish some sort of procedure to recover these books. Schools may want to consider a financial incentive system whereby students are given cash awards to return books, which could actually save money over the cost of replacing the textbooks.

There are several examples of schools and districts that have implemented some of these types of activities:

1. A Los Angeles elementary school undertook a number of formal responses to the needs of transient students by creating a "culture of caring" at the school, including: (a) a revived intake process that immediately assesses the needs of incoming students; (b) a restructuring of classroom so that transient students can be distributed throughout the school; (c) term structures to support teachers, students, and parents; and (d) a buddy system for newcomers (Beck et al., 1997).

2. A program was developed and evaluated that provided an orientation and tutoring program for transfer students in 10 parochial elementary schools in Chicago (Jason et al., 1982).

3. A southern California high school developed and implemented a comprehensive plan to reduce mobility, as well as mitigate its negative impacts, by: (a) conducting a thorough interview of all new students to assess their needs and explain the school’s services; (b) introducing new students to "buddy" students; (c) serving new students to join a Newcomers Club that meets weekly with school counselors; (d) providing extra opportunities for parents to meet with counselors in order to establish a home-school relationship; (e) providing an opportunity for mobile students to maintain credits by offering independent steady learning packets for students who will miss more than 20 days of school; (f) providing an opportunity for mobile students to make up credits by offering after-school core academic classes and work experience for credits; (g) trying to reduce student withdrawal, in part through an extensive after-school literacy program to increase the school’s "bidding power" (Rumberger et al., 1999, p. 97).

4. A Maryland suburban high school initiated a "New Student Support Group" where two counselors met weekly with new students to provide information about the school and to discuss students’ concerns about reeducating (Wilson, 1991).

5. A district-wide program in the Chicago public schools was created to make students, parents, educators, and other community members aware of the social and academic consequences of students mobility and to promote establishment of school-based programs (Chicago Panel on School Policy, 2000).

What Students and Families Can Do

As noted above, not all school changes are detrimental; some strategic or purposeful school changes can be beneficial. Moreover, students and parents have the right to choose the best school for their needs. But sometimes students or families change schools in reaction to unpleasant or undesirable situations at their school; this is often in the middle of the academic year. Some of these changes are unnecessary as well as detrimental. Consequently, there are a number of things students and parents can do to help prevent needless mobility as well as to help mitigate the potentially harmful effects of mobility that may be necessary or desirable.

1. Attempt to resolve problems at school before initiating a school transfer.
2. If possible, make school choices between sessions or at the end of the school year.
3. When a transfer is made, parents should personally sign students into their new school and meet with a school counselor. They should also make sure that their child's school record is forwarded in a timely manner from the previous school.
4. Parents should speak to their students about the transfer process.
5. Teach two or three weeks after a transfer to make sure the student is adjusting to the new school.

What States Can Do

Although student mobility rates from the 2000s show that students, families, and schools are clearly impacted by this problem, and many states have constitutional authority for education and provide the majority of funds for local schools, states have a great interest in addressing this problem. Below are some actions states might consider:

1. Require schools to report mobility and completion rates to the state Department of Education.
2. Include mobility rates as a measure of school effectiveness in school accountability and performance reports.
3. Hold school districts accountable to report the whereabouts of students who leave a school for reasons other than regular transfers. For example, 41 states currently monitor student mobility.
4. Require school districts to track the students’ records to the new school in a timely fashion.
5. Have the state Department of Education prepare a guidebook for students and parents on mobility that describes the advantages and disadvantages of changing schools and provides information on actions they can take to prepare for the move and ease the transition into a new school.
6. Have the state Department of Education prepare a guidebook for school districts that provides information on how they can take more systematic approaches to normal high school mobility programs to improve the integration of new students in a school.

Conclusions

Student mobility is a common feature of American schooling, affecting a large number of students, families, and schools in the United States. Both the causes and consequences of student mobility have been well-documented, although many educators believe that mobility is the inevitable result of family relocation, in addition to the complexities of the policies and schemas of schools and districts—such as prior enrollment, overcrowded schools, and zero-tolerance policies—that can lead to voluntary or involuntary school transfers, especially during the secondary school level. The newly enacted federal law, No Child Left Behind, includes provisions that allow students in low- performing schools to transfer to another public school. See http://www.ed.gov/about/overview/index.html.

Some mobility can actually be beneficial if the owen and timing, and severity, of a student's formal schooling.


