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COMMENTARY

The Academic Consequences of Changing Schools

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PACE | Policy Analysis for California Education

PUBLISHED: December 11, 2012

Student mobility has long been a concern of educators, since frequent school enrollment changes are associated with poor outcomes along many dimensions. Students change schools for many reasons, however, and it is difficult to determine whether changing schools is, in itself, harmful to students. It could be that the reasons for the change in schools are what account for the poor outcomes, rather than simply being new to a school.

In "School Enrollment Changes and Student Achievement Growth: A Case Study in Educational Disruption and Continuity" published in October's *Sociology of Education*, sociologist Jeffrey Grigg uses longitudinal data from students enrolled in the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools in grades three through eight from 1998–2003. The district reconfigured its attendance policies after a desegregation order was lifted, and a major component of the reconfiguration was a reduced number of compulsory (or "promotional") changes for some student cohorts.

Student mobility research traditionally focuses on noncompulsory school changes. The author argues that four types of school changes—compulsory and non-compulsory school changes between and during the academic year—share the experience of being new to a school. They also include other influences, but it is the common experience of being new to a school that has the potential to impact students.

The author estimates the impact of all four types of school changes on students' annual growth in reading and mathematics. The models compare growth in test scores in a year in which a student changed schools to the same student's growth in a year when he or she stayed in the same school, and found that changing schools was associated with lower growth in the year the change occurred. The magnitude of the change was approximately six percent of expected growth, comparable to ten days of instruction.

The results suggest that students *are* penalized academically for changing schools, net of other factors, at least in Nashville during this period. Surprisingly, the consistency of the estimates for the four types of mobility suggests that this impact is similar regardless of the reason for the move: the estimates for students who were obligated to change schools due to a promotion is similar to the estimate for students who changed schools for other reasons.

Disadvantaged students change schools more frequently than advantaged students, and these results suggest that each time students change schools—no matter the reason—they fall slightly behind their peers. The other factors in their lives that cause the school change may account for much of the difference, but changing schools itself does seem to play a small role. Unlike many of the correlates of disadvantage, however, educational policy can directly influence how frequently students change schools and can address the experience of being new to a school. School mobility has also been introduced as a tool for school reform,

particularly for disadvantaged students in failing schools. The evidence of an achievement penalty associated with changing schools, however, complicates the potential for school mobility to serve as a school reform remedy.

The full study is available here: Jeffrey Grigg, School Enrollment Changes and Student Achievement Growth: A Case Study in Educational Disruption and Continuity, Sociology of Education, October 2012, vol. 85 no. 4, 388–404.

Suggested citation Policy Analysis for California Education. (2012, December). *The academic consequences of changing schools* [Commentary]. Policy Analysis for California Education. https://edpolicyinca.org/newsroom/academic-consequences-changing-schools

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