# *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 classrooms and schools they attend. 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.*

> [S]ince I've been here it's well over 800 students from July through December who have left. They have been replaced by 800 more coming in. We're about 3800 as far as active students right now . . . so you're constantly dealing with 1000 students leaving, 1000 students coming in. (Principal from California high school, as quoted in Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999, p. 29)

Student mobility is widespread in many schools and districts through the United States. Student mobility is the practice of students making nonpromotional school changes, often during the school year. Mobility not only can harm the students who change schools, it can also harm the classrooms and schools they attend.

Many educators believe that student mobility is an inevitable result of students changing residences. Indeed, the majority of student mobility in the United States is a result of families changing residences. But not all student mobility is the result of residential mobility, particularly at the high school level. Schools contribute to mobility due to such things as overcrowding, class size reduction, suspension and expulsion policies, school choice, and the general academic and social climate. Schools can also help address the problem by both reducing unnecessary mobility and mitigating its harmful effects.

This article examines the issue of student mobility. It first examines data on the incidence of student mobility in the United States. It then reviews the research literature on the social and academic consequences of mobility for both students and schools. Next, it reviews the research literature on the causes of mobility. Finally, it discusses what parents, schools, districts, and policymakers can do to address this growing educational problem.

## The Incidence of Student Mobility

Student mobility is pervasive in the United States. According to data collected through the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) 1998 Math Assessment, 34% of 4$^{th}$ graders, 21% of 8$^{th}$ graders, and 10% of 12$^{th}$ graders changed schools at least once in



*Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 72, No. 1 (Winter 2003)

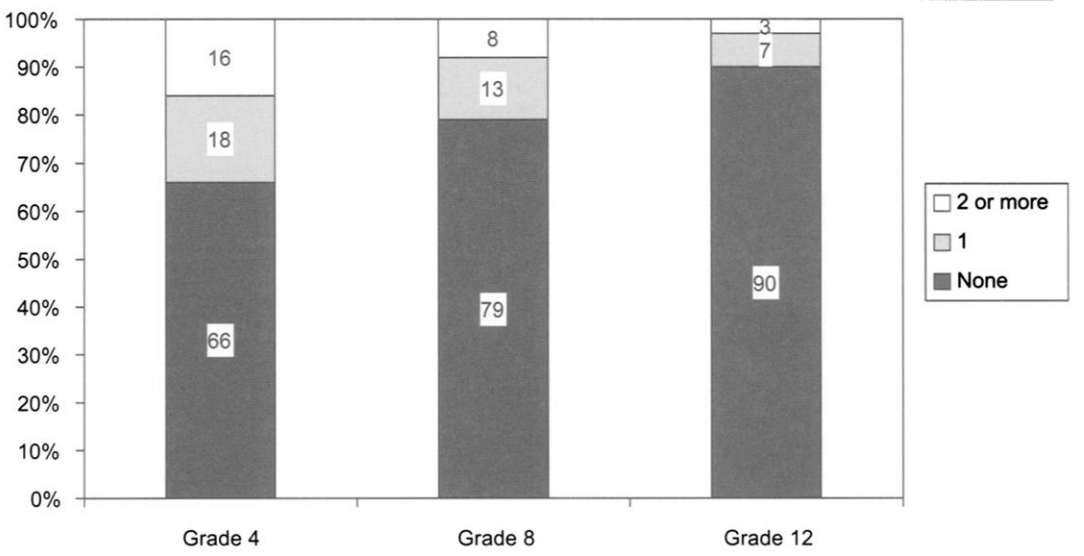
the previous two years (see Figure 1). The incidence of student mobility varies by race, ethnicity, and family income. For example, data from the 1998 NAEP show that: (a) 41% of Hispanic American and 45% of Black fourth-grade students changed schools in the last two years, compared to 27% of White and 33% of Asian American fourth-grade students; and (b) 43% of fourth-grade students who were eligible for the national school lunch program (i.e., low-income students) changed schools in the last two years, compared to 26% who were not eligible (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The incidence of student mobility is even higher when viewed over a student's entire elementary and secondary career. Based on data from a national longitudinal study of a cohort of eighth graders in the United States, more students made nonpromotional school changes during their elementary and secondary school careers than remained in a stable pattern of attending a single elementary, middle, and high school (Rumberger et al., 1999, p. 23). School changes were more common during elementary school than during secondary school. In fact, mobility is the norm during elementary school, while it is the exception during high school.

Student mobility not only varies widely among students, but also among schools. It is especially high within large, predominantly minority, urban school districts. A survey of more than 50 local education agencies throughout the United States revealed that in many districts the proportion of students enrolled in a school for less than the entire academic year often exceeds 30 or 40% (Ligon & Paredes, 1992). In the Los Angeles Unified School district, for example, the turnover rate (the proportion of students who entered after school started or left before school ended) across the district exceeded 40% in the 1990–91 school year (Los Angeles Unified School District, 1991). In the Chicago public schools, an average of 80% of students in the district remained in the same school from

**FIGURE 1**

*Percent of Students by Number of School Changes over Previous Two Years and Grade, 1998*




*Note:* From "1998 Reading Assessments," by National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002. Copyright by U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.

September 1993 to September 1994, and only 47% remained in the same school over a four-year period (see Figure 8 of Bryk, Thum, Easton, & Luppescu, 1998, 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 85% of their students from one year to the next (see Figure 1 of Kerbow, 1995, for complete data). Another study of 247 urban and suburban U.S. high schools estimated that, on average, 22% of the 10th-grade students left before completing 12th grade, but mobility rates varied widely among schools, ranging from a low of 5% to a high of almost 60% (see Table 2 of Rumberger & 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 how mobility affected him:

> Moving and changing schools really shattered my personality. I feel like there's all these little things I picked up from all of the different schools and I feel all disoriented all the time. There's no grounding. I always just feel like I'm floating. It's psychological damage, really . . . because you never feel like a complete person. That's how I feel—I feel fragmented. Every time I moved I felt less and less important. (Rumberger et al., 1999, p. 37)

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 'cause, well, I don't know about other people, but to me it's hard because I'm not the type of person to make friends real quick. (Rumberger et al., 1999, p. 38)

Research has demonstrated that mobility is related to misbehavior and youth violence. Two studies based on a national health survey found that children in families who moved frequently were more likely to experience a number of psychological and behavior problems compared to families who did not move or moved infrequently (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood, Halfon, Scarla, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). 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 no significant effect on behavior problems, but changing schools during the last two years of high school increased behavior problems (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). A longitudinal study that tracked 4,500 adolescents in California and Oregon from seventh grade through high school found that repeated elementary school moves increased the risk of violent behavior in high school by 20% (Ellickson & McGuigan, 2000). Studies have also found that mobile high school students are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Rumberger 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 personal and family problems that contribute to their mobility, it is important to take into account those prior 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 limita-

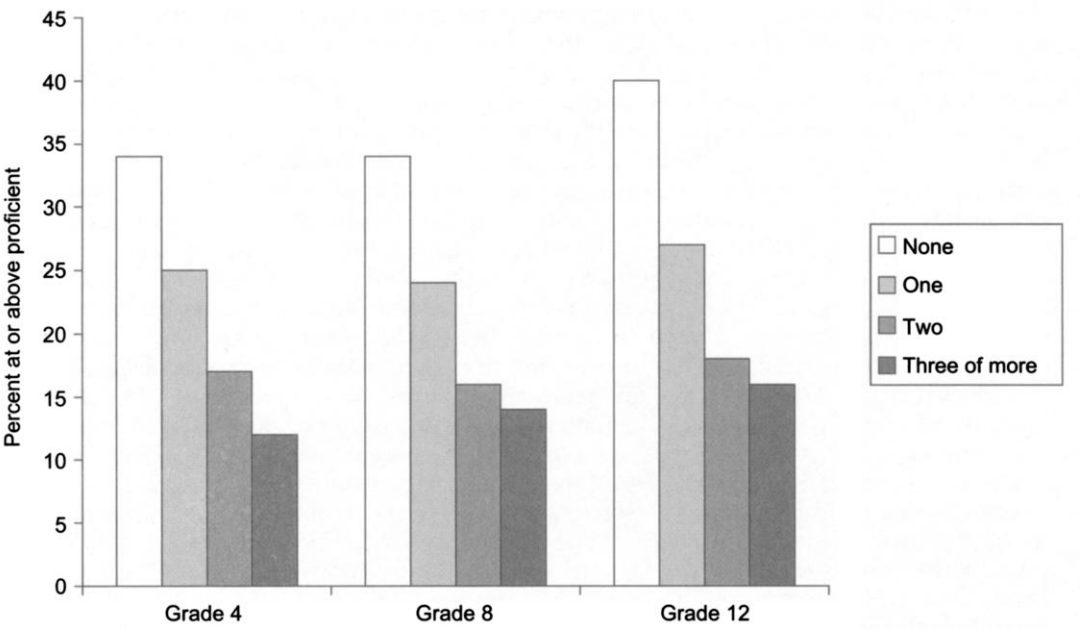
tions, the research evidence suggests that mobility hurts academic achievement in some situations, but not in others.

Data that do not control for background characteristics of students show that mobile students have lower achievement than stable students. For example, data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress show that students with two or more school changes in the previous two years were half as likely to be proficient in reading as students with no school changes (see Figure 2). Similarly, studies that do not control for the background characteristics of students consistently find that mobile students have lower achievement than non-mobile or stable students (Audette, Algozzine, & Warden, 1993; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1989). 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, 1994).

Yet, studies that take background differences into account find that mobility may be more of a symptom than a cause 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 that predated their school changes (Temple & Reynolds, 1999). One well-designed study of elementary students in Baltimore found that although mobility during elementary school had a negative association with test scores, grades, retention, and referral to special education in fifth grade,

**FIGURE 2**

*Percent of Students At or Above Proficient in Reading by Number of School Changes in Previous Two Years and Grade, 1998*




*Note:* From "1998 Reading Assessments," by National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2002. Copyright by U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement, National Center for Education Statistics.

the association was largely insignificant once controls were introduced for the family and academic performance in first grade (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996). In other words, mobile students came from poorer families and had lower academic performance before they were mobile, a finding supported by other studies (Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Nelson et al., 1996). Yet even this conclusion must be tempered by another observation from the Baltimore study—that middle-class White students with high academic performance in first grade were more likely to leave the school district altogether:

> These profiles reveal two very different migration streams, distinguished by their destination: It is the relatively well-to-do and Whites who most often leave the city system; it is the poor and minorities who most often shift about within it. (Alexander et al., 1996, p. 6)

Several national studies have also examined the impact of student mobility on the academic performance of students across grade levels. These studies were based on a national health survey that provided controls for the demographic characteristics of students but not prior educational performance. These studies found that only frequent family moves (three or more) predicted grade retention, but fewer moves did not (Simpson & Fowler, 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 suggest that two-parent families may have more so-called "social capital"—a concept developed by sociologist James Coleman (1987) 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 1,393 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 (Hofstetter, 1999). Another study of 30,000 sixth and eighth graders 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 schools and residences during high school reduced 12$^{th}$ grade test scores in reading and mathematics, but that changing schools alone had no significant impact (Pribesh & Downey, 1999). The other study compared the impact of mobility during the first two years of high school (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1996) with the impact during the last two years (grades 11–12). Early mobility had no impact on 10$^{th}$ grade math scores, yet changing schools (but not residences) during the last two years of high school had a strong negative impact on 12$^{th}$ grade math scores (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Interestingly, however, early residential or school changes actually improved later test scores. This suggests that the timing of mobility matters during high school, which is supported by our California study of mobility, in which some students made "strategic" school moves to improve their educational prospects, while other students made "reactive" school moves to get out of poor or dangerous situations (Rumberger et al., 1999).

The strongest impact of mobility is on high school graduation. There is overwhelming 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, even after controlling for a variety of family background variables, mobility reduced the odds of high school graduation (Haveman & 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. Three 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 10th grade (Rumberger, 1995; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Teachman et al., 1996).

Two studies also examined the impact of mobility on school dropout at 12th grade. One study found that, even after controlling for family and academic background factors, changing schools between 1st and 8th grades, as well as changing residences between 8th and 12th grades, increased the odds of dropping out of school by 12th grade (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). The same study also found that both school changes and residential changes between 8th and 12th grades reduced the odds of graduating from high school for 8th graders and for 12th graders, with even one school change during high school reducing the odds of graduating from high school by more than 50%. The other study found that residential changes between 8th and 10th grades and between 10th and 12th grades increased the odds of dropping out among 10th graders, while early school changes decreased the odds (Swanson & Schneider, 1999). In other words, residential and school changes between 8th and 10th grades increased the odds of dropping out by 10th grade, as reported earlier, but for those students who did not drop out, school changes decreased the odds of dropping out. This suggests that mobility has a negative impact on some students, but may have a positive impact on others.

### The Impact of Mobility on Schools

Mobility not only impacts students who change schools, it impacts classrooms and schools that must 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 high schools that had high student mobility rates (Rumberger et al., 1999). Another study found that students in schools with high turnover suffer academically (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2001). The impact of student mobility on school performance is not lost on school personnel, who point out the problems it can create for school accountability:

> As you know, we get tested at the end of the year, and you know, it's assumed that the people we test at 9th grade are the ones we tested at 10th grade and if the scores go up or down, we're going to say it was related to instruction, but it may not have been. It may be an issue of how our mobility impacted us one way or another. We're not doing longitudinal studies with the same kids in a school. I mean, we've got 30–40% of the kids who, in any one year, are checking out. So I don't know how we hold schools accountable. (Rumberger et al., 1999, pp. 58–59)

In our California study, school personnel characterized the overall effects of student mobility at the school level as a "chaos" factor that impacts classroom learning activities, teacher morale, and administrative burdens—all of which can impact the learning and achievement of all students in the school. Teachers were adamant about how disruptive and difficult it is to teach in classrooms with constant student turnover. It is particularly disruptive in doing group work, as one high school teacher pointed out:

> We start on a project, and prepare for the project 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 tiring, time consuming. Oftentimes you lost momentum in what you are doing. It takes a lot of time to readjust and refocus and figure out how you're going to do it. (Rumberger et al., 1999, pp. 54–55)

Similarly, a Chicago study found that the pace of instruction was slower in schools with high rates of student mobility (Smith, Smith, & Bryk, 1998).

School administrators reported how time consuming it is simply to process students when they enter and exit a school. As one high school counselor pointed out:

> It can take all day to check in a new student. If you saw our enrollment form... They've got to see the nurse, bilingual counselor, Title I coordinator... My second week I got here I had 50 parents waiting outside my office to enroll their kid. (Rumberger et al., 1999, p. 56)

Beyond the administrative costs, school personnel also identified other impacts, such as the fiscal impacts that result from mobile students failing to turn in textbooks and impacts on school climate, particularly the difficulty of developing cohesiveness and school spirit among students when there is so much transience.

### Causes of Mobility

What accounts for the generally negative impact of mobility on student achievement, and why, in some cases, does mobility not adversely impact achievement or even improves it? The answer depends, in part, on the reasons students change schools.

Many educators believe student mobility is the inevitable result of students moving. Indeed, data bear this out. One national study found that 70% of all school changes between grades 8 and 12 were accompanied by a change of residence (see Table 2 of Rumberger & Larson, 1998, for complete data). In a study of student mobility in Chicago, less than 60% of school changes among sixth graders were due to residential changes (Kerbow, 1996, p. 154). But within large urban schools, which earlier data indicate have very high mobility rates, both residential and school changes tend to be local. The Chicago study of mobility found that 62% of all students who left a Chicago public school re-enrolled in another Chicago public school the next year (Kerbow, 1995, p. 3). The same study suggests why mobility may have negative impacts on students:

> In many instances, highly mobile students attend several schools during their elementary years. No one school may retain the student long enough to have a positive impact, particularly if the student has a learning difficulty. Information about the student's progress and abilities may not quickly follow the students who migrate through the system. Thus, the evaluation process may be repeated and the implementation of specific programs delayed. These students have spent their entire elementary years in Chicago public schools. Nevertheless, it may not be clear who is accountable for their learning. (p. 3)

While mobility may be often associated with residential moves, there are many reasons students change schools. In our California mobility study, parents of 12th-grade students who changed schools over the previous four years reported three types of reasons for changing schools. The most frequent reasons were related to the family moving. In both California and in the rest of the nation, 58% of the parent-reported school changes were due to moving. The second most frequent reasons were that students asked to change schools. Almost half of parents reported that their adolescents changed schools because they asked to be transferred. Although the questionnaire used to gather this information did not ascertain the reason for the student's request, only in some cases did parents report that the student transferred to take advantage of a specific educational program or asked to be transferred to a public, private, or magnet school. Therefore, it is possible that many students asked to be transferred in order to leave a problematic situation at their school, as suggested by interview data reported below. The least frequent reasons were that the school asked the adolescent to transfer, either because of disciplinary or academic problems.[1] In this area, there were very large differences between California

[1]These are sometimes referred to as "opportunity" transfers. Students may voluntarily transfer to avoid a less desirable alternative, such as home study.

parents and parents in other states. In California, about 30% of the parents reported that their adolescents' schools asked them to transfer, whereas in other states, only about 10% of the parents reported that their adolescents' schools asked them to transfer.

Several statistical studies have identified some specific factors that predict student mobility. Again, residential mobility is highly predictive of student mobility. One national study found that students who moved were five times as likely to change schools as students who did not move (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Although mobility does not seem to be strongly related to family income and socioeconomic status after controlling for student background characteristics, it does appear to be related to family structure. Families without both parents, principally single-parent and step-families, have higher incidence of residential moves (Tucker et al., 1998) and higher rates of school moves (Lee & Burkam, 1992; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Teachman et al., 1996).

Several student-related factors have also been identified in these studies. Low school performance (GPA), behavior problems, absenteeism, and low educational expectations all predicted school changes during high school after controlling for family factors (Lee & Burkam, 1992; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). For example, students who reported behavior problems in eighth grade were 40% more likely to change high schools than similar students who did not report behavior problems (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). And students who did not expect to go to college were 70% more likely to change high schools than similar students who expected to attend college. These findings support the idea that mobility represents a form of disengagement from school that is influenced by both social and academic factors.

School-related factors also predict student mobility. In a national study of the attrition of 10$^{th}$-grade students in 247 urban and suburban high schools, several school characteristics were associated with high student mobility even after controlling for the effects of student background characteristics on individual rates of mobility (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). Schools with high concentrations of retained students (who are more at risk of dropping out) and minority students had higher mobility rates. Schools with better teachers, as reported by students, and higher teacher salaries had lower mobility than other schools. These results suggest that the quality of teachers matters.

Current literature suggests two ways that schools affect student mobility (as well as school dropout). One way is indirectly, through general policies and practices that are designed to promote the overall effectiveness of the school. These policies and practices, along with other characteristics of the school (e.g., student composition, size, etc.), may contribute to *voluntary student turnover* by affecting conditions that keep students engaged in school. This perspective is consistent with several existing theories of school dropout and departure that view student disengagement as the precursor to withdrawal (Finn, 1989; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989). The other way is directly, through explicit policies and conscious decisions that cause students to *involuntarily* withdraw from school. These rules may concern low grades, poor attendance, misbehavior, or being overage and can lead to suspensions, expulsions, or forced transfers (Bowditch, 1993; Fine, 1991; Hess, Wells, Prindle, Liffman, & Kaplan, 1986). This form of withdrawal is school-initiated and contrasts with the student-initiated form mentioned above. This perspective considers a school's own agency, rather than just that of the student, in producing dropouts and transfers. One metaphor that has been used to characterize this process is discharge: "students *drop out* of school, schools *discharge* students" (Riehl, 1999, p. 231). Finally, interviews with school personnel in our California study identified two additional conditions found in large, urban schools that could contribute to student turnover: open enrollments and overcrowding. Open enrollment allows students to change schools readily if

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 adjust to new academic standards and expected classroom behaviors (Jason et al., 1992). Interviews with school personnel in our California mobility study revealed some of the reasons why mobile students have trouble finishing—they sometimes get placed in classes that do not contribute to high school completion or they get placed 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 made "strategic" school changes to seek a better educational placement, in general, reported positive academic impacts, while students who made "reactive" school changes due to 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 late 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?[2]

What can and should be done about student mobility? The answer to this question depends on how one views this phenomenon. 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 neither strategic nor related to moving. Rather, both students and schools initiate student transfers in response to social 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 and 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

[2]Most of the material in this section comes from Rumberger et al (1999).

substantial and meaningful reforms can dramatically reduce their student mobility rate. For example, in a three-year period (1987–90), Hollibrook Accelerated School in Houston, Texas reduced its student mobility rate from 104% to 47% (McCarthy & Still, 1993, p. 80). Programs that target high-risk students—those 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. Staff can "problem solve" with withdrawing students about how they could remain at least until the year end—for example, how they can use public transportation or be transported 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 class to assign the student to if the student does not bring a transcript.
   - Create and train a core of volunteer student coaches who have experienced entering the school late.
   - 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.
3. They can facilitate the transition of incoming transfer students *as soon 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. The problems students face 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 (evening or Saturday) parent conferencing.
   - Create referral procedures for new students who are showing adjustment problems.
   - Sponsor school-wide "acquaintanceship" contests or activities.
   - Ask staff and teachers to mentor a new student who might have difficulties academically or socially.

5. They can assess the past 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 past 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 risk factors as well, such as students who have been retained in earlier grades, since those 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 prepare *in advance* to accommodate incoming students. Teachers who know they must face a large number of new students in their classes throughout the school year can prepare in advance for their arrival. This will help the students and reduce the immediate demands of dealing with these students at the time of their arrival. Some specific things teachers can do include:
   - Develop learning packets that give important background information and activities of key units so that students coming in the middle of a unit can be given the packets as 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 5 to 10 personal questions that the student can answer in two pages. This will not only help the teacher know the student better but also provide a sample of writing skills.
   - Create a short list of class rules and procedures for routine assignments.
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 welcoming.
   - During class (or ask the student to stay a few minutes after class) make an appointment at lunch or nutrition to give the student an orientation to the class.
   - Introduce them to another student who entered late and who 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 hazards of changing schools mid-year.
   - Provide tutoring or review before or after school or at lunch.
   - When teaching, stand near the new student 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 classwork or having social or psychological adjustment problems. Refer to other professionals as necessary.

9. Schools should establish procedures to recover 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 allowed 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 revised intake process that immediately assesses the needs of incoming students; (b) a restructuring of classrooms so that transient students can be distributed throughout the school; (c) team structures to support teachers, students, and parents; (d) individualized instruction; and (e) 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., 1989).
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) inviting 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 study 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 credit; (g) trying to reduce student withdrawal, in part through an extensive after-school leisure program to increase the school's "holding 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 relocating (Wilson, 1993).
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 in their school, often in the middle of the academic year. Some of those 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 changes between semesters 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 records are forwarded in a timely manner from the previous school.
4. Parents should make a follow-up appointment with a school counselor and teachers two or three weeks after a transfer is made to see how their adolescent is adjusting to the new school.

### What States Can Do

Although student mobility results from the actions of students, families, and schools, states are clearly impacted by this problem. And because states have constitutional authority for education and provide the majority of funds for local schools, states have a clear 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 monitor the whereabouts of students who leave a school early, particularly students who say they are transferring to another school within the district, in order to insure that students actually enroll in another school in a timely fashion.
4. Require school districts to transmit the student's 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 actions they can take to reduce unnecessary school transfers and to respond to the needs of transfer students.
7. Provide funds to schools with high mobility to establish 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 this phenomenon are more complicated than many educators assume. For example, although many educators believe that mobility is the inevitable result of family relocation, some mobility results from the policies and actions of schools and districts—such as open enrollment, overcrowded schools, and zero-tolerance policies—that can lead to voluntary or involuntary school transfers, especially at the secondary school level. The newly enacted federal law, No Child Left Behind, includes a provision that allows students in low-performing schools to transfer to another public school (see http://www.nclb.gov/next/overview/index.html).

The impact of mobility is also complicated. Although a substantial body of research shows that students can suffer psychologically, socially, and academically from changing schools, the impact of mobility depends on such factors as the number of school changes, when they occur, the reason for the changes, and a student's personal and family situation.

Some mobility can actually be beneficial if the reason and timing represent a "strategic" move to a better educational placement.

Mobility is here to stay. Yet schools and districts can help reduce the incidence of needless mobility and help to mitigate its potentially damaging effects. School reform efforts can help reduce mobility by making schools more attractive to students and parents. Schools can also initiate a number of strategies to help transfer students adjust to their new school setting and to quickly provide the educational and support services transfer students may require.

With increasing pressure on schools to adopt reforms and raise test scores, addressing the issue of mobility may not seem a high priority for schools. But failing to do so could easily undermine those efforts as well as hurt the students and families the schools are charged to serve.

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