



# Student Mobility: How It Affects Learning

A growing body of research suggests collecting data on student mobility can help identify vulnerable students and keep them on a path to academic achievement. —Getty Images

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It's always tough to be the new kid in the middle of the school year: to find new friends, adapt to new teachers and rules. But for more than 6.5 million students nationwide, being the new kid can be a frequent occurrence—and one that exacts a cost to their social and academic development and that of their classmates.

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As more states begin to use longitudinal data to improve schools under the Every Student Succeeds Act, a growing body of research suggests student mobility

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may be a key indicator to identify vulnerable students and keep them on a path to academic achievement.

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“To be sure, multiple moves are a dangerous signal, but even one move increases the [student’s] risk of not graduating or getting delayed in graduating,” said Russell Rumberger, a research professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, who studies dropout risks and student mobility.

What follows is an overview of the big trends, opportunities, and concerns associated with student mobility. Links to additional resources are included in each section for those who would like to dig deeper.

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## What Is Student Mobility?

In K-12 education, “student mobility,” also called “churn” or “transience,” can include any time a student changes schools for reasons other than grade promotion, but in general it refers to students changing schools during a school year. It may be voluntary—such as a student changing schools to participate in a new program—or involuntary, such as being expelled or escaping from bullying. Student mobility is often related to residential mobility, such as when a family becomes homeless or moves due to changes in a parent’s job.

School mobility refers to the frequency of such moves among students in a particular classroom, school, or district. High churn in schools not only can hurt the students who leave, but also

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those who remain enrolled.

## A **2014 report by the Governor's Office of**

**Student Achievement in Georgia** found schools with higher concentrations of mobile students had higher percentages of students with disabilities and fewer students in gifted education programs.

In rural Vermont, a significant number of students move around the area with their families, often needing to switch school districts as a result. Superintendent Jay Nichols, of the Franklin Northeast Supervisory Union, explains how student mobility is a problem in his district. [Watch more Education Week videos.](#)

In a report on student mobility by the National Academy of Sciences, Chester Hartman, the research director for the Poverty and Race Research Action Council in Washington, noted that high-poverty urban schools can have more than half of their students turn over within a single school year.

"It's chaos," he said in the 2010 report. "It makes all the reforms—smaller classes, better-trained teachers, better facilities—irrelevant."

In fact, in a study of 13,000 Chicago students, University of Chicago researcher David Kerbow found those who had changed schools four or more times by 6th grade **were about a year behind** their classmates—but students in schools with high churn were a year behind those in more stable schools by 5th grade.

"It is unclear how school-based educational programs, no matter how innovative, could successfully develop and show long-term impact" in a high-churn school, Kerbow concluded.

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## Who Is Likely to Be Highly Mobile?

The most common causes of student mobility are residential moves related to parents' jobs or other financial instability. A 2010 Government Accountability Office study followed students who entered kindergarten in 1998

through 2007. It found 13 percent of students changed schools four or more times by the end of 8th grade, and highly mobile students were disproportionately more likely to be poor or black than students who changed schools twice or fewer times. The same study found families who did not own their own homes made up 39 percent of the most highly mobile students.

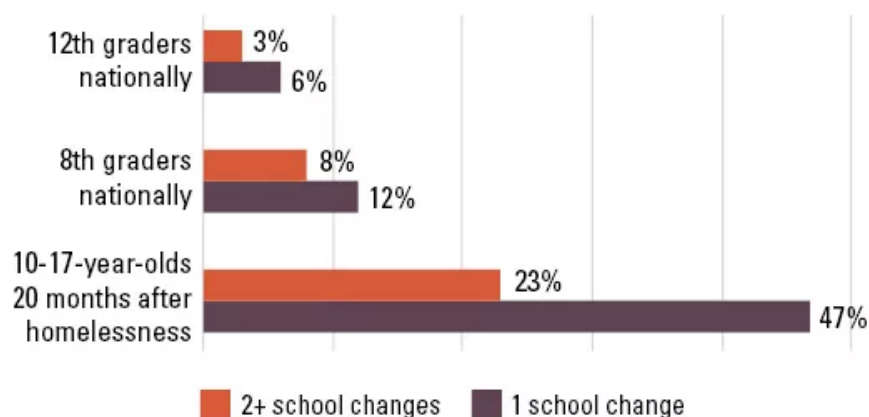
Similarly, a **2015 state policy report in Colorado**, which tracks student mobility in its districts, found mobility rates in 2014-15 ranged from more than 17 percent for students in poverty to

more than a third of migrant and homeless students, and more than half of all students in the foster care system.

That reflects national trends. Homeless students are likelier than other students to change schools not just several times in their school career, but multiple times in a single year. Also, they remain more mobile than other students even after their families find stable homes. A June report from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that 20 months after regaining permanent housing, formerly homeless adolescents were more than four times as likely to change schools at least once than peers who had not been homeless.

## Homelessness and Student Mobility

Students who were previously homeless continue to be at higher risk of changing schools nearly two years after gaining stable housing, according to researchers.



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“Outside the military, where families don’t know people, they don’t have those support systems,” Rumberger said.

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## **How Does Mobility Affect Student Learning?**

Even **normal transitions—at the start of school, 6th and 9th grades, for example**—can cause some students to stumble. Prior research has found students who attended K-8 schools have slightly higher academic achievement than those who attended 6-8 middle schools, and students are at higher risk of dropping out or having behavior issues during transition years like 9th grade.

**Various studies have found student mobility**—and particularly multiple moves—associated with a lower school engagement, poorer grades in reading (particularly in math), and a higher risk of dropping out of high school.

While research has found students generally lose about three months of reading and math learning each time they switch schools, voluntary transfers, which are more likely to happen during the summer, cause less academic disruption and may be associated with academic improvement if they lead to better services for the student.

Mobility can be particularly hard on children in the early grades, as they learn foundational skills. A 2015 New York University study found that out of 381 low-income, predominantly ethnic-minority students in Chicago, 327 changed schools at least once from kindergarten through 4th grade, and 40 students transferred three or more times. The more often students moved, the lower they scored on both the state standardized math test and on teacher observations of the students’ critical thinking.

## **What Does the Every Student Succeeds Act Say About Student Mobility?**

Not much. Charter school authorizers must include rates of student attrition as part of the accountability metric for schools, but school mobility is not required for accountability for other public schools under ESSA.

For homeless students, **the law requires districts** to try to reduce student mobility by keeping a homeless student in the original school unless the student or a parent or guardian requests a transfer. ESSA requires districts to track academic achievement of homeless and foster students.

For students of military families, ESSA also requires schools to use a military-student identifier for students whose parents are in the active or reserve military, or in the National Guard. The identifier is intended to allow educators, parents, and military leaders to track how military-connected students achieve across multiple schools.

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### **What Can Be Done to Support Highly Mobile Students?**

States and districts are experimenting with a number of policies and programs intended to stabilize school populations and buffer the effects of student mobility. A 2016 study of **Nevada schools found that regardless of students' risk of attrition**, more-equitable school policies can help reduce churn; higher levels of racial segregation, particularly in academic programs, predicted churn.

Some that have shown promise include:

- **Better student data transfer:** There are some national systems designed to follow students in traditionally transient communities, such as the Migrant Student Data Exchange for the children of agricultural workers. As more states develop longitudinal databases with personal student identifiers, other systems are being developed for military, homeless, and foster care system youths.
- **Quick turnaround for student records:** Every state and the District of Columbia have signed onto the **Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children**, which lays out guidelines for school districts to send unofficial copies of all student records to parents within 10 days to help them enroll their students at the new school, and provide official records to the school receiving the student. The compact also calls for the student's new school to accept prior school placements for honors classes, prerequisites, and programs.
- **Flexible enrollment:** Attendance boundaries often force students to change schools when they change addresses, even if the student is still close enough to travel to his or her current school. A 2013 report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston found these enrollment requirements **exacerbate the disruptions that students face** from home foreclosures and other forced family moves. By contrast, family moves that did not require students to change schools had "negligible effects." This and other studies suggest that more-flexible enrollment policies that allow students to finish out the school year after a move—or nonresidential enrollment in general—could reduce mid-year school transfers.

Similarly, Kansas City, Mo., schools are developing a

central database of student records to allow faster enrollment, and a smartphone app to allow parents to see a list of available schools and resources for smoothing a student's transition to a new school.

- **Interagency supports:** Because student mobility often results from family instability, school leaders who want to make their campuses more stable are experimenting with broader, multipronged supports.

Kansas City, Mo., for example, **held a citywide summit on student mobility** in 2015. As a result, schools identified at-risk students and paired them with both peer and adult mentors to meet several times a week to discuss the students' sense of belonging at their schools, everyday challenges and supports, and to reflect on the students' behavior, attendance, and academic performance each week. The plan also would enable parents of students in poverty to go to "one-stop shops" throughout the district that could provide resources for job placement, adult education, and aid for housing or utilities.