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Addressing a Moving Target: Poverty and Student Transiency in Rural Upstate New York

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What is the Issue?

Student transiency refers to students making unscheduled and non-promotional school changes from one school or school district to another, most often as a consequence of residential change. Often described as “bouncing” or “ping-ponging,” transient school children tend to be disproportionately low income, low achieving, high need students who may, over the course of several years, withdraw and re-enroll in the same set of school districts multiple times (Schafft 2005; 2006)¹. High levels of mobility, especially when associated with social and economic distress, can pose significant social and academic problems, affecting students, families, schools, and communities (Killeen & Schafft 2008). Mobility in the rural context may involve particular challenges including additional records transfers across districts, heightened probability of interrupted student services, and greater academic disruption as students encounter varying curricula and academic scheduling.

We often assume that families move in response to opportunity at the place of destination, such as a more desirable neighborhood or school district, or to be closer to a new job. However, when economically distressed families move, it is often not in response to the “pull” of opportunity. Rather, it often comes as a consequence of employment instability, family disruption, and, in particular, problems with housing availability, affordability and safety that act to “push” families out of a residence. These types of moves occur more frequently in communities experiencing economic downturns, especially those characterized by shortages of adequate, affordable and safe housing and limited labor market opportunities (Fitchen 1995; Schafft 2005). Student transiency can be pronounced with some districts experiencing 25 percent or higher turnover rates (Schafft 2005). This means that over the course of an academic year a district can expect that 1 in 4 students will make an unscheduled entrance to or exit from the district.

Data and Methods

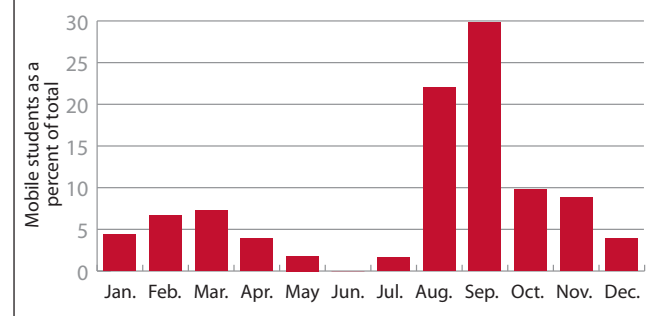
We explored the causes and consequences of student transiency through a mixed methods case study of three predominantly rural Upstate New York school districts². The qualitative data were gathered from 30 interviews with teachers and administrators across the three districts. The quantitative analysis was based on two years of student-level administrative record data including student demographics and family structure of

mobile students, date of entrance and/or withdrawal from the district, district of origin and/or destination, schools attended in the last 4 years, and reasons for school change. These data were supplemented in two of the districts by data maintained in a School Master Database system as well as by student achievement data for grades 3-12 obtained through the local Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES).

Findings

Our study revealed significant levels of student movement and associated challenges. With annual turnover rates between 18% and 26%, these districts experience pronounced levels of student mobility³. The majority of in-migration or new student enrollments occur after the start of the school year, with half occurring on a fairly even basis from mid-September through the end of the school year (see Figure 1). Since the frequency of new student enrollment varies considerably over a calendar year, we characterize students that enroll between May 31st and September 20th as *movers*. Those that arrive after September 21st of a given year are termed *late movers*. This categorization proves to be a very useful way to examine variability among mobile school children.

Figure 1: Student mobility by month of enrollment.



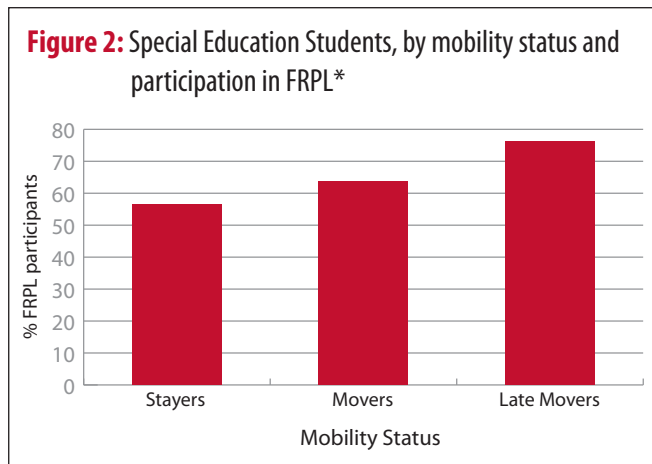
Mobile students, particularly *late movers*, have problematic social and academic outcomes relative to their non mobile peers. Disciplinary and attendance patterns for mobile students are weaker relative to non-mobile students. Test score evidence generally, but not at each grade level, suggests a relationship between mobility and reduced test scores. Specifically, end of grade examinations in mathematics, across Grades 3-8, show

¹For a full copy of the 2007 Condition Report which includes all references (with the exception of footnote 4), please visit the Education Finance Research Consortium's Website at <http://www.albany.edu/edfn/>.

²This research was funded by the State University of New York's Education Finance Research Consortium.

³An earlier study of student transiency in Upstate New York found that average transiency rates in persistently poor districts were about 15 percent as compared with 9 percent in wealthier districts (Schafft 2005).

reduced outcomes associated with mobility. Educators report a high proportion of mobile students in need of special education services. Indeed more than three-quarters of students eligible for free or reduced priced lunch (FRPL - is one indicator of poverty status) who enroll after September 20th (late movers) also receive special education services (see Figure 2).



*Relative poverty status determined by participation in the (national) Free and Reduced Lunch Program (FRPL) which determines eligibility for families at or below 185% of official poverty levels.

Causes of high mobility in rural areas

While teachers and other district staff often have incomplete knowledge of the circumstances surrounding each unscheduled student entrance into or exit from a district, they do have detailed local knowledge about the contexts in which families live and how this might affect school mobility. Consequently district staff are able to offer important insights into the broader underlying causes and the immediate and longer term consequences of student mobility. Poverty, family related instability and housing insecurity were all viewed by interviewees as important causes of student transiency.

A high school teacher noted,

“Overall the economic status in this community is not very high. It just seems the economic status and family breakdown is kind of like a combined picture. I think that what ends up happening is families are not together anymore. The whole environment has changed. They go back and forth from one parent to another and the parent moves from one community to another.”

While family instability was noted as the primary cause of student movement, unaffordability or inadequacy of housing was described by district respondents as another important cause of movement. An elementary school principal explained,

“We get families that move out of the district because their homes were condemned. I had a family last year with about five different children. Their house was not livable. They found a place up in (a neighboring district). They were driving the kids in, in the back of a pickup and dropping them off out in front. We were

aware that they were doing this, but they were also in the process of trying to find another place to live in the community.”

Highly mobile students in this study are largely untargeted and underserved as a student population with special needs and only rarely identified as migrant or homeless. Further, most movement is geographically bound, occurring both within districts (and hence not resulting in a school change, but contributing nonetheless to a child's overall sense of social stability and continuity), and across districts, most often to adjacent and nearby districts.

Consequences of high mobility

Socially and economically unstable home environments place students at a pronounced social and academic disadvantage by disrupting educational experiences and reducing the commitment that mobile students have to both the school in which they are enrolled and their education in general. High stakes assessments associated with the federal No Child Left Behind legislation further complicates the picture. Public ratings of schools mean that teachers and district personnel face pressure to show acceptable student performance levels, raising concerns about the effects of low-achieving highly mobile students on test scores. In smaller rural schools this may take on a magnitude not found in larger, urban schools (Goetz 2005)⁴, and teachers find that they may be cast suddenly in the spotlight because of low scoring students. Teachers in our study reported concerns over their ability to get a student caught up, especially if the student is under-performing academically. However, some personnel may also be less willing to invest time and energy in the welfare of mobile children because of the perceived (and often actual) risk that they will move on again shortly.

Conclusion

While student transiency is an issue with very immediate educational implications, its root causes are beyond the typical purview of educators. Rather, the precipitating causes of mobility reflect the multiple social and economic stressors faced by poor families in New York's rural communities. Public policy, especially connected with educational assessment, must recognize this so that schools are not sanctioned due to the low achievement of economically displaced and residentially mobile students, and, secondly, so that students are not stigmatized for their mobility. The NYS Department of Education may wish to consider partnering with its Boards of Cooperative Education Services in an effort to more systematically document and address student movement. Our research strongly suggests that integrated community-level interventions involving coordination not only across school districts, but new and strategic collaborations between schools and a variety of community-based organizations such as housing and social service agencies should be considered. In sum, student transiency needs to be understood not as simply an educational problem, but rather a phenomenon that is symptomatic of a much deeper and broader set of social and economic insecurities facing many of rural Upstate New York's communities. ♦

⁴Goetz, S.J. (2005). Random variation in student performance by class size: Implications of NCLB in Pennsylvania. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 20(13), 1-8.

