

Learners on the Move:
Responsive Teachers Fill in the Gap for Highly Mobile Students

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Introduction to issue.

The best education usually comes from staying in one town and one school district. Continuity in instruction, learner outcomes, emotional stability, and social relationships prevail when doing so. Unfortunately, school districts in the United States have students who are constantly on *the move*. These transient students lead to teachers and schools having revolving doors where students enter classrooms, then within days or even weeks withdraw, and even then re-enter again during the school year.

The term *highly mobile students* (also referred to as *transient students*) describe children and youth ages 6-21 who have moved six or more times during the school years (Popp, Stronge, Hindman, 2003). These changes in location are considered non-promotional moves. Another definition includes students who have moved more than once during the school year (U.S. GAO, 1994).

Many circumstances lead to high mobility such as homelessness, foster care, migrant work patterns, poverty, family disruptions, immigration, family military assignments, and/or parents not paying rent and being forced to suddenly vacate homes. One type of student mobility is prompted by the job market, housing and economic conditions. Lack of adequate low-income housing and family instability often lead to residential changes. Such changes are intimately related to urban poverty (Gromlich, Laren, & Sealand, 1992). Moving most often occurs in inner cities. If parents accept new jobs in new cities, the result is moving their children as well.

Another type of mobility is *intra-city mobility*. This type of mobility can be caused by poverty. On the other hand, although the link between poverty and low student performance in the general population is clear (McCarthy, 1995), some schools are successful despite their being

located in low-income areas, and some poor children are successful within a school that is not performing well.

Another type of mobility is due to economic circumstances that cause families to move, such as seasonal work. Some parents are forced to move where there are seasonal jobs such as working during busy times at Christmas or in the summer time where extra help is needed. Although parents may be trying to improve conditions for their children, parents who move frequently may harm the educational development of their children (Biernat & Jax, 1990).

Many educators believe that student mobility is an inevitable result of parents changing residences. But not all student mobility is the direct result of parents' mobility, particularly at the high school level. Other factors contribute to high mobility, i.e., overcrowding in schools, suspension and expulsion policies, school choice, and the general academic and social climate.

Mobility not only can harm the students who change schools, it can also harm the classrooms and schools they attend. One can only imagine the harm it does to the students' education and individual test scores on standardized high stakes assessments. Research indicates that as the mobility of students increased within the school year, their test performance on the criterion-referenced test and norm-referenced test decreased (Popp, 2003).

Moving to a new school is not always the best solution.

Some highly mobile students and parents feel the best way to fix problems at one school is to simply pick up and move to another school. In most instances, they find that those same problems follow them and as a result, in just a few short weeks, they are back to the first school or have enrolled in yet at another school.

One teacher talks openly about her personal experiences with these types of students.

“Personally, I have seen a mobile student this year. We have a student now that started with us at the beginning of the year. He constantly got in trouble at

school. His grades were low. He wasn't getting along with his peers and he thought the answer would be to start over at a new school. He soon found himself in trouble at his new school and ended up dropping there and is back with us. He found that in the end, it hurt his education because he was back and forth between schools and missed vital instruction. He wouldn't understand important concepts because he didn't have the basic understanding of the concepts. I would try and get him caught up, but often found that I would spend time teaching him the material and get him ready for a test and he would then miss more days and get further behind. The more days he miss, the more frustrated he became because he would come back to school and all of his six teachers would give him his missing assignments. And all of these assignments overwhelmed him. More than once, I would pull him aside and talk to him. I'd tell him that he was only hurting himself by missing so much school and if he wasn't careful, I was afraid he might miss too many days and would end up in summer school trying to get his lost credits. I also talked to him about how important it is to be in school because he has to take the End of the Course Algebra Exam. This is the statewide assessment at the end of the school year. I explained to him that if he didn't do well on the EOC, he would have to take remediation classes the next year (and possibly even the next three years). I also let him know that I had high expectations for him and I was sure he was very capable of learning and exhibiting proper behavior. I'm not sure if what I said made a difference but for the yet later, he did seem to have improved some in his attendance. He even took a test in Algebra one week after my talk with him and he made an 80%. I can't tell you how excited he was (S. Burnett (personal communication on May 1, 2011)).

Another teacher discusses some ways to help highly mobile children become successful.

“I feel like most of these highly mobile children can be helped. If we can help these mobile students be less disruptive, make them feel welcome and acclimate them and their families, provide student with loyal buddies, and offer tutors and extra learning programs, I think we'll see a decline in mobility. We might not be able to help all of the highly mobile kids, simply because we cannot control family issues. But for the most part, I think we can make a difference (V. Crusa (personal communication on April 10, 2012)).”

Findings of the literature.

Teachers should be concerned about student mobility. High mobility not only affects student who move frequently; it is disruptive also to teachers and students in classrooms. It is apparent that some districts suffer more from highly mobile students than other districts. Inner city students are hardest hit. Approximately 25% of urban 3rd graders were found to be highly mobile compared to 14% of suburban and rural students. In the U.S half a million students

attended more than three schools between 1st and 3rd grades. In the same manual report, according to the (U.S. Department of Education 1995), 3% of the eighth graders in the U.S. schools changed schools two or more times after entering first grade and before the middle of eighth grade, 10% of these students changed schools two or more times between the middle of eighth grade in the spring of 1992. Poor families move 50% to 100% more often than non-poor families.

Due to transient families, the consequences for academic achievement can be severe. The success of children who change schools frequently is being highly jeopardized. In addition, as schools focus their attention on high academic standards required by national and state mandates, the highly mobile children often face increased difficulty in achieving success (Schwartz, Scott, and Birman, 1994).

Mobile students are half as likely to graduate from high school as their non-mobile peers. Mobile students have lower attendance rates and lower achievement rates where a 20% absentee rate resulted in achievement scores 20 points lower than non-transient peers. Mobile students are twice as likely to repeat a grade. Mobile students may take 4-6 months to recover academically from a move to another school in the same school district or another school district, in the same state or another state. The stated statistics indicate the serious danger of students moving from school to school; they have little success in consistently attaining any learner outcomes (ibbid, 1994).

What makes a school successful depends on a range of factors. Schools that are prepared to address the needs of highly mobile students build in strategies to work with these students. *Schools and teachers can be more prepared in advance when not taken by surprise. Knowing that a child is coming to the classroom from another classroom and/or exiting the classroom for*

another classroom helps teachers be more prepared in working successfully with the child. In advance, these schools plan and establish routines to make transfers less disruptive for all students.

A public school teacher with over thirty years of experience as a classroom teacher and principal advocates the need for professional development in this area of need and includes her thoughts on how to welcome highly mobile parents into the learning process (classroom).

“In order to be effective working with these students, professional development is a *must* for teachers and administrators. School usually just accept that mobile students will come and go, yet many teachers are frustrated with their lack of knowledge on how to include these students in the classroom successfully without delaying other students’ learning. Thus, schools need to be informed on how to make mobile students and families welcome in the school program as a whole, and specifically the regular education classroom. Upon arrival of these highly mobile students, a good strategy would be one of schools creating welcome packets for students and families, making personal contact with parents and students when the students are registered (Jolene Davis, personal communication, May 5, 2011).”

Another teacher speaks to making all new highly mobile students welcome to a new school:

“One example would be the school counselor proactively making sure all transferred students feel welcome at our school. Effective schools at the middle school and high school levels also ask and assign peer students to help these students get to classes, including getting to and from other buildings on the campus. When schools know that students will be departing from the school, upon departure, teachers and counselors can provide closure by giving students appropriate school records they need for the next school (personal communication, Virginia Crusa, April 10, 2012).”

Reasons for being less mobile.

A student staying at one school as long as possible is best for everyone involved. By doing so, a sense of community is formed. The basic need of love and belongingness comes from being in one place for a longer period of time. Also, a sense of security and what to count on is an innate need for all human beings, especially children. By *sticking to one school*, the student

becomes much more secure in the learning process and socialization with peers and classmates. By doing so the student becomes an important and integral part of the group. The teacher has the opportunity to acquire information about the child that helps the teacher in planning for lessons and acquiring prior knowledge of the child. The students ultimately learn in an orderly, sequenced, and organized manner. Learner outcomes have much more of a chance to be demonstrated in formal assessments. Achievement happens! Sticking is vital for real achievement – personal, social, and academically.

Changing schools can cause a multitude of problems.

Some students will change schools for personal, academic, and family-related reasons. In contrast, some students will stay in one school district throughout their senior year in High School. Those students who make frequent school changes often experience disruptions in their home life as well as in school. The alarming results are lack of continuity of lesson content, ongoing feelings of alienation, and disruption in social ties and a sense of alienation, belonging to any group of learners. It would be a perfect world if all of these factors could be eliminated; however, there are many variables related to the lack of *sticking* to a school for a long period of time. Another reality is: children go through a frustrating transition entering a new school. Adjustment problems invariably arise. Change is difficult for adults, let alone children too. Therefore, many children have trouble making sense out of their new world because they lack a sense of connections between older and newer school curriculum. They also lose connection to any short term friends they have acquired.

It is very important for highly mobile students to feel like their academic and emotional needs are being met on a daily basis. Although all areas of the curriculum are important, highly

mobile students have the same needs as other students – proficiency in the basic skills, including both reading and mathematics.

On the other hand, there are many students who stay in one district the whole time they are in school. (Mehana and Reynolds 1995) found in one study that students who change schools frequently were lower achievers than non-mobile students. The same researchers also reported that frequent mobility negatively affects sixth-grade students' reading achievement. Mobile students are more likely to repeat a grade and have multiple behavior problems.

Highly mobile children need special attention.

Teachers need to give special attention to students who have experienced single or multiple transfers. When students are mobile, it is hard for teachers to track their prior progress. In contrast when a student attends only one school on a long-term basis, the school can make a positive difference in the student's achievement. When mobile students become less mobile, the teachers can design and implement differentiated instruction, viewing the students as ones with special needs (Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990). In accommodating the mobile students' needs, teachers may need to slow down their instruction, check carefully for prior knowledge and re-teach missed concepts. In general, students' opportunities to learn depend on the pace with which new materials are introduced into the curriculum (Barr, 1974). Essentially, in order for teachers to do their best in delivery of instruction, we need to move at the pace best suited for each child.

Conclusion and final thoughts.

Children need home lives that are safe, secure, stable, and full of love. If at all possible, they need to stay in one location, one home, and one community. They also need to remain in one school district as long as possible. Teachers in all public schools see students who move

frequently. Teachers understand that children do not have the choice to move to another school or town. Some children are victims of situations out of their control.

When children are continually moved from one school to another, in many cases, parents lack financial or emotional stability in their own lives. This lack of stability greatly impacts and adds to their children's lack of stability. Basic needs are important for survival and success. All people in life need to feel safe and secure. When moving frequently, children do not feel secure. They feel disjointed, out of control, and a desperate need for belonging to one school, community, and teacher.

Highly mobile children have lower levels collaboration with their peers, less collective focus on student learning, and a lower orientation to motivation in learning (Sebring et al, 1995). No doubt, there will always be mobile families in this country. However, teachers should value any time they spend with a mobile student as an opportunity to make a difference in the life of a needy student. An attitude shift needs to occur; teachers should warmly welcome the child as a diverse child with special needs.

The mobile child's first visit to the classroom is often interpreted as an inconvenience to the teacher. This is a natural occurrence in that many teachers are taken by surprise; the child often walks into the classroom one morning empty handed and with no supplies. The teacher has no information or at best, limited information about the child. Instead of the mobile child entering the classroom for the first time is being viewed as an *inconvenience*, the teacher should *try to be more positive with a more optimistic outlook*. The teachers should ask, "What can I do to help this child who may have just come into my classroom with a lot of emotional baggage?" Teachers wear many hats; sometimes we are teachers and sometimes we are missionaries. In many cases, we are both! These situations will continue to come up; the empathic and

professional teacher rises to the occasion. Any quality time a teacher spends with the mobile child is a worthwhile investment!

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