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Residential Mobility of Low Income Households and the Effects on Schools and Communities

by

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Why Do People Move?

The United States is a mobile society. Census figures show that between March 1999 and March 2000 slightly more than 16 percent of the population changed residence. Residential mobility is often thought to be both voluntary and opportunity-related. That is, people choose to move in order to start a new job, live in a better neighborhood, attend a better school system, or in some other way improve their quality of life.

However, some groups are far more likely to make residential changes than others, including renters and people living below the poverty line. During that same time period between March 1999 and March 2000, nearly 33 percent of renters moved, and nearly 28 percent of people living in households below the poverty level moved.

For many resource-limited households, residential mobility is largely unplanned and unpredictable, and is often a result of factors including family stress and breakup, the inability to pay rent and bills, and poor or

unsafe housing quality. When people move because of these factors, the move is usually short distance, often nearby to other housing or housing shared with friends or family. Instead of resulting in greater opportunity, this mobility can be both symptomatic of and a causal factor in household insecurity and broader community economic disadvantage.

Student Mobility and the Effect on Schools and School Districts

One of the effects of this residential change is chronic **student mobility**, the *non-routine and unscheduled movement of students from one school or school district to another*.

Student mobility has serious consequences for students, schools and communities. Evidence from research strongly suggests that frequent student movement not only may have significantly negative consequences for mobile students because of academic and social disruption, but may also have negative effects on *non-mobile* students in schools with high levels of

student movement. Schools themselves face challenges in the areas of classroom administration, as well as in district level planning and budgeting. Student transiency may pose significant strains to the school district staff and on the overall capacity of districts to provide an adequate educational experience to all students. Increased or unexpected school costs are often reflected in increased local tax burdens.

A recent Cornell University study on student mobility examined the student mobility in nearly 300, mostly rural, upstate New York school districts. The findings include:

- There is wide variance in the levels of student mobility experienced by surveyed districts, ranging from almost no turnover to over 40% annual student turnover;
- The most disadvantaged communities were disproportionately affected. Indeed, the rate of student transiency in the poorer districts is about twice that of wealthier districts;
- Districts reported that poor and high-need students were most likely to be high-frequency movers and that much of the movement appeared to be confined to a several-district area shuffling back and forth;
- Districts are negatively impacted because of the high costs associated with high-need, highly mobile students, as well as by the unpredictability of the movement, vastly complicating planning and budgeting processes. School district administrators also expressed strong concern that their schools may be negatively affected by the effect of low-achieving mobile students on school testing assessments.

What Can School Districts and Communities Do?

The issues surrounding residential mobility of low income families must be broadly understood as a community and regional development issue, and not simply an issue for schools and school districts. Many factors associated with student transiency, such as housing insecurity (the inability to obtain safe, stable and/or affordable housing) and household economic hardship, are outside the control of the school district itself. At the same time, these are problems that are common to many communities in New York State, and schools and communities *do* have resources to at least partially address some of these problems.

Understanding and Documenting Student Transiency

Student transiency often involves unpredictable costs including increased expenditures on special programs. These costs often are eventually reflected in increased local tax levies. Other strains on schools, including slowed curricula and lowered test scores, are more difficult to assess. However, despite the effects on school systems, transient students and their families are a largely unrecognized and untargeted population.

Because of this, schools should be aware of the degree of student movement within local school systems and communicate the prevalence and severity of the problem to a range of stakeholders including parents, community members, local leaders and policy makers. Greater documentation of not only the degree but the effects of student transiency would put schools in a better position to argue for increased support for high need and highly mobile students. Ideally, documentation should occur not only at local, but at state levels as well.

Inter-District Collaboration

Increased documentation and awareness may also reveal new opportunities for inter-school district collaboration. Most mobile

students only move short distances, often just to neighboring districts. Because of this, districts should keep track of which other neighboring districts seem to be frequent districts of origin and destination for mobile students. These districts would then be in a better position to work with each other in areas from records sharing and transfer, to outreach services, to collaborative efforts at addressing high residential mobility and the needs of transient students.

Efficient Records Transfer

When students *do* move out of a district, schools can help minimize the negative effects of school change by streamlined records transfer so that students may be efficiently and appropriately placed in academic and social support programs at the new school. Efficient records transfer helps ease the adjustment for the student in the new school and reduce the academic and social disruption associated with the move.

Community and School Outreach

Schools can initiate public awareness campaigns and work with parents to communicate the negative effects of unscheduled school transfers on students. Part of this means working with parents to let them know that unavoidable school changes, if possible, should be made between the academic terms or at the end of the school year. Schools can also work to build effective referral systems so that students and their families are aware of available community services and are able to take advantage of them as necessary. Schools should be especially careful to monitor the academic status and progress of mobile students and make contact with parents about the academic progress of new students. Staff, including guidance counselors and teachers, can work with mobile students to encourage stability and integration into the school environment through mentorship and new student programming. Some schools have created

orientation materials including information packets and videos to help new students learn about and adjust to their new school environment. The more that a school can do to welcome new students and integrate them and their families into the community, the more likely are the chances of increasing the stability of the student body. Students who are involved and invested in their schools, and families who similarly have multiple opportunities to become involved in their communities are more likely to remain in their community.

Community Housing

In many communities in New York State and across the country, there are serious and often increasing shortages in the supply of affordable and safe housing. In New York, as elsewhere, much of the mobility of resource-limited households is due to housing instability and insecurity. Some have suggested that local public housing authorities be made aware of the effects of forced housing displacement upon the academic and social status of children, so that housing displacement and relocation due to eviction and other factors be kept to a minimum during the school year. Some local governments have mandated housing quality inspections for all privately-owned rental properties, helping to ensure a basic level of housing quality within the community. The 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act provides expanded resources for homeless students, by widening the definition of who is considered to be homeless. This definition includes children who live in substandard housing or who share housing with others because they lost their previous home. Resources to assist these students are made available to districts through the McKinney-Vento Act.

Conclusion

Housing insecurity and the frequent residential mobility that often results are serious issues for communities and schools.

While most of the root causes of student transiency, including poverty and housing insecurity, are *beyond* the control of schools themselves, there are measures that can be taken by schools and communities that may lessen the frequency of poverty-driven mobility and the severity of its consequences for students, their families and their schools. However, more still needs to be learned about the causes and consequences of student transiency. Schools can play an important role in this learning process as part of their efforts to advocate for disadvantaged students.

The complete report, "**Low Income Student Transiency and its Effects on Schools and School Districts in Upstate New York: The Perspective of School District Administrators**" may be accessed through the Department of Development Sociology's *Rural New York Initiative* website at: <http://rnyi.cornell.edu>. The extended report also contains information about additional online resources concerning student transiency and the resources of schools and communities.

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