

THE HAZARDS OF CHANGING SCHOOLS FOR CALIFORNIA LATINO ADOLESCENTS

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Students in the United States are highly mobile. Previous research has shown that the majority of students in the United States change schools between grades 1 and 12 for reasons other than promotion from one level to another (e.g., elementary to middle school). Research also has found that student mobility is generally detrimental to student achievement. Despite this evidence, the issue of student mobility has not received much attention from educational researchers, practitioners, or policy makers.

In this report we examine student mobility among California Latino adolescents. Student mobility may be especially important in California because of its highly mobile population. Latinos are the largest and fastest growing segment of the state population. According to California Department of Finance estimates, the Latino public-school population is projected to triple in size between 1986 and 2006, while the non-Latino white population is projected to decrease. Consequently, if student mobility can be problematic for both students and schools, as previous research suggests, it is especially important to understand the nature of mobility among the Latino population.

Using longitudinal data on two samples of California students--the first a group of 8th-grade students who were surveyed over a six-year period from 1988 to 1994; and the second a group of low-income, urban Latino 7th-grade students who were first studied over a six-year period from 1990 to 1996--this study examined the incidence, causes, and consequences of student mobility, particularly during high school. Throughout this study we examine differences between Latino and non-Latino white students, as well as differences among Latino students. Here we summarize some of the major findings of this study.

THE INCIDENCE OF STUDENT MOBILITY

- **Student mobility is widespread in the United States and especially in California.**

Almost two-thirds of all students in the United States made at least one nonpromotional school change between grades 1 and 12. In California, almost three-quarters of all students made at least one nonpromotional school change between grades 1 and 12. Among students who changed schools, most made at least two nonpromotional school changes.

- **In California, Latino students have mobility rates similar to non-Latino white students, whereas in the rest of the United States Latino students are more mobile than non-Latino white students.**

These differences are due to differences in non-Latino white mobility rates between California and the rest of the United States, whereas Latino mobility rates are similar nationwide. Seventy-three percent of non-Latino white students in California made nonpromotional school changes between grades 1 and 12 compared to 67% of Latino students. In the rest of the United States, 57% of non-Latino white students made nonpromotional school changes between grades 1 and 12 compared to 68% of Latino students.

- **In California, Latino students appear to be less mobile than non-Latino white students between grades 1 and 8, but more mobile than non-Latino white students between grades 8 and 12.**

Between grades 1 and 8, 68% of Latino students changed schools compared to 73% for non-Latino white students. Between grades 8 and 12, in contrast, 37% of Latino students changed schools compared to 31% for non-Latino white students. Although these figures suggest different mobility patterns between Latinos and non-Latino whites, the differences were not statistically significant.

- **The gap between parent and student reports of school mobility is greater among Latinos than among non-Latino whites, especially in California.**

Nationally, 19% of parents reported that their adolescents changed schools between grades 8 and 12, while 27% of students reported changing schools. Interviews with students, and the experience of school practitioners, suggest that student reports of mobility, especially during high school, are more accurate than parent reports. In California, 25% of non-Latino white parents reported that their adolescents changed schools, compared to 31% of non-Latino white students, a gap of six percentage points. However, 19% of Latino parents reported that their adolescents changed schools, compared to 36% of Latino students, a gap of 17 percentage points. One explanation for this gap is that Latino parents are more likely to have low-incomes, and low-income parents are generally less involved in their adolescent's school activities.

- **Most urban Latinos transfer to other schools within the same district.**

In a longitudinal sample of Latino adolescent students attending a large urban school system in California, 81% of nonpromotional school changes between grades 7 and 12 involved transfers to another school within the same district. A similar pattern of within-district transfers was observed in a recent study of Chicago public schools.

- **More than half of urban Latino transfers are from one comprehensive high school to another comprehensive high school.**

Fifty-nine percent of the transfers of urban Latino students were to a similar school setting--a regular

middle school or comprehensive high school. Such transfers do not appear to provide a different or better educational experience for transfer students, and may be of questionable academic value.

- **Female urban Latino students are more likely than males to transfer to nontraditional educational settings.**

Among low-income, urban Latinos, most of whom are at-risk of educational failure due to poverty and other social factors, almost half of them can be considered "highest-risk" because they exhibit poor academic and social behavior compared to their classmates. Thirty-nine percent of female highest-risk transfers and 26% of female at-risk transfers were to nontraditional settings, such as continuation high schools and independent study at home. In contrast, only 16% of male highest-risk transfers and 9% of male at-risk transfers were to such settings. Fourteen percent of the highest-risk males transferred to correctional facilities.

THE CAUSES OF STUDENT MOBILITY

Students change schools for many reasons. Some changes are family-related, primarily occurring when families change residence. Others are school-related, such as when students or schools initiate a transfer because of academic or social problems (e.g., poor attendance or misbehavior). We investigated the reasons students change schools and some underlying causes of student mobility.

- **Only half of all secondary school changes are made because of residential moves.**

Although residential mobility is widespread in the United States, only about half of all nonpromotional school changes between grades 8 and 12 were made because of residential moves unrelated to school. The other half were due to school-related reasons, usually when a student requested to change schools.

- **In California, Latino students were twice as likely as non-Latino white students to change high schools for reasons other than moving.**

Almost 50% of California Latino students who changed schools between grades 8 and 12 did not move, whereas only 25% of California non-Latino white students who changed schools between grades 8 and 12 did not move. For both Latinos and non-Latino whites, changing residences increased the odds of changing schools between grades 8 and 12, but more so for non-Latino whites than for Latinos. Non-Latino white students who moved were five times more likely to change schools as non-Latino white students who did not move, after controlling for the effects of socioeconomic status and other family characteristics. But Latino students who moved were only twice as likely to change schools as Latino students who did not move.

- **Three times as many California students changed high schools because of disciplinary problems as students in other states.**

Seventeen percent of parents in California reported that their adolescent changed schools between grades 8 and 12 for disciplinary reasons compared to 5% of parents in other states.

- **In California, disciplinary problems predicted school mobility among Latino students but not among non-Latino white students.**

California Latino students who misbehaved in 8th grade were 58% more likely to change high schools as California Latinos who did not misbehave. In contrast, misbehavior did not predict school changes for non-Latino white students. These results support the notion that nonacademic factors play a role in school mobility, especially for Latino students. It also raises questions about whether schools respond differently to Latino and non-Latino white students who have disciplinary problems.

- **Almost twice as many Latino students as non-Latino white students in California changed schools because the student requested a change of schools.**

Sixty-one percent of Latino parents reported that their adolescents changed schools because they requested a change, compared to 38% of non-Latino white parents. This suggests that more Latino secondary students than non-Latino white students are assuming the responsibility of changing schools. Given that changing schools increases the odds of dropping out, it is problematic that Latino adolescents appear to be making such an important decision independently.

- **In California, second-generation Latino students were half as likely to change schools as third-generation Latino students.**

Even after controlling for the effects of family structure and socioeconomic status, second-generation Latino students were only half as likely to change schools as third-generation Latino students. This result is consistent with numerous studies that have found second-generation students are generally more successful in school and have lower dropout rates than third-generation Latino students. These findings raise questions about the acculturation process among Latino immigrant families and their students.

- **Students who change schools in elementary school are more likely to change schools in secondary school.**

Both Latino and non-Latino white students who changed schools between grades 1 and 8 were 20% more likely to change schools between grades 8 and 12 than students who did not change schools between grades 1 and 8, even after controlling for differences in socioeconomic status and other background factors.

THE EDUCATIONAL CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT MOBILITY

Previous research has found that student mobility has detrimental impacts on student achievement. In this study we investigated the impact of student mobility on one specific educational consequence: completing high school. Although high-school completion represents only one aspect of educational achievement, it is a particularly important one. High school completion is the gateway to higher education. For students who do not go on to higher education, research has shown that *completing* high school has a stronger impact on subsequent labor market earnings than what is learned (academic achievement) in high school.

- **California students who made even one nonpromotional school change between grades 8 and 12 were less likely to graduate from high school than students who remained at the same school.**

Among California Latino adolescents, 89% of students who made no school changes graduated from high school, compared to 63% who made one school change and 60% who made two or more. Among California non-Latino white adolescents, 96% of those who made no school changes graduated from high school, compared to 83% who made one school change and 62% who made two or more. This suggests that for Latino students there was less benefit from changing high schools than for non-Latino white students. Benefits from changing schools were even less likely for urban Latino students. Among Latino student adolescents, 65% who did not change schools between grades 7 and 12 graduated from high school, compared to only 30% of the students who made one or two nonpromotional school changes. Thus not only were low-income, urban Latinos less likely to graduate from high school compared to Latino students statewide, mobility had a greater adverse affect on their chances of finishing high school.

- **School dropouts were more likely to have changed schools than students who never dropped out of school.**

Among both Latinos and non-Latino whites, the majority of school dropouts had changed schools at least once between grades 8 and 12, while the majority of nondropouts did not change schools. Among Latino dropouts in these grades, more than 40% changed schools only one time before quitting school, and only 10% changed schools three or more times. Among non-Latino white dropouts, in contrast, only 22% changed schools one time before quitting school, while more than 25% changed schools three or more times. These data suggest that most dropouts don't simply quit one secondary school, but try at least one other school. Non-Latino white students are more than twice as likely as Latino students to try several schools before dropping out.

IMPLICATIONS

Our findings--that student mobility is widespread and adversely affects students' chances of completing

high school--have important implications for all educational stakeholders: state policy makers, local school officials (district administrators, principals, and teachers), and students and parents. Each of these stakeholders is affected by student mobility, and each can play a role in responding to it.

Responses can serve two purposes. One is to reduce the incidence of at least some types of mobility--mobility that is unnecessary and not educationally productive. The other is to mitigate the potentially harmful impacts. Appropriate responses depend on the type of, or reason behind, mobility. In order to formulate appropriate policy responses it is important to distinguish between three types of mobility: (1) family-related; (2) school-related, voluntary; and (3) school-related, involuntary.

Family-related mobility is when families change residences: families move from one area of the country to another, perhaps to find a better job. This kind of mobility is not preventable--changing residences requires changing schools. The appropriate response is to better prepare for and respond to the change, to smooth transitions to new schools. Schools might, for example, provide an orientation program for new, incoming students by matching them with students who can show them around and provide academic as well as social support.

School-related mobility, on the other hand, is more preventable. Most Latino parents who report that their adolescents changed high schools say that their adolescents requested the change. These are voluntary school changes initiated by students. Based on our study of urban Latinos, these changes are not made for academic reasons, and are usually a change to another comprehensive high school rather than to a magnet or other specialized high school. These types of school changes are preventable--that is, if schools were more responsive to students and parents, these changes could be reduced or prevented. Appropriate responses to preventable school moves might include increasing student engagement--both socially and academically--and using various strategies (such as orientation programs) to minimize negative impacts.

More than a third of Latino parents report that the school initiated the change because of academic or disciplinary problems. These school changes are basically involuntary. In order to promote school safety, California schools have been given increased latitude to expel or transfer difficult or misbehaving students. Several case studies also have documented a school practice of coercing difficult students to leave voluntarily. Disciplinary school changes are problematic, because they are being used for Latino students more than for non-Latino white students, which raises questions about the evenhandedness of such practices. Involuntary school changes might require yet a different response, such as investigating schools that have high rates of mobility to examine whether these schools are discharging large numbers of students, rather than accommodating student needs.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

To prevent some kinds of student mobility and to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of all mobility, educational stakeholders could initiate a variety of appropriate responses. In this report, we identify

possible responses that could be initiated by state policy makers. We call these "policy considerations" because we have not analyzed the costs or political feasibility of implementing them. After considering these constraints, however, we believe that useful and effective responses could be undertaken by appropriate state officials through legislation or through Department of Education mandates and directives.

To provide information on the extent of student mobility in California and to begin to address what we see as a serious yet unrecognized educational problem, we believe state policy makers should consider:

1. Requiring schools to report mobility rates to the Department of Education. For example, schools could be required to report the proportion of students who leave a school (say a minimum of 15 days) before the end of the year, as well as the proportion of new students who enter after the start of the year.

One reason so little is known about student mobility in California is that the state does not collect relevant data. Schools could easily provide counts of students who leave school before completing the year, because they routinely collect and report related information through the California Basic Education Data System (CBEDS). Since schools must now report dropouts, they could also report students who transfer.

2. Including attrition rates as a measure of school effectiveness in school accountability reports.

The Department of Education periodically issues school accountability report cards, which are designed to measure the effectiveness of schools. School mobility rates should be included as a measure of school effectiveness because they reflect, in part, the "holding power" of schools--their ability to retain and educate students who walk in the door. As with all measures of school effectiveness, a school's demographic characteristics, which can contribute to school mobility rates, should be taken into account.

3. Holding 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, to ensure that students actually enroll in another school in a timely manner.

Student mobility is a problem, in part, because students who change schools are not monitored between leaving one school and entering another, even within the same district.

Currently, no one is accountable for these students during this transition. Our data show that several weeks often elapse before secondary students re-enroll. This must change to avoid an unnecessary interruption in a student's schooling. Because school districts are legally responsible for the educational welfare of their students, and because most transfers occur within districts, school districts should be accountable to the state for minimizing the transition time.

4. Requiring school districts to transmit student records to the new school in a timely manner.

One frequent problem is that student records are not promptly delivered to the new school. Without these records, personnel at the new school cannot know a student's educational history and what services he or she may need. Data on urban Latino students show that 80% of nonpromotional school changes are within the same district, so record transfers should be easily done.

5. Having the state Department of Education prepare a guidebook for students and parents that describes the advantages and disadvantages of changing schools, and provides information on how to prepare for the move and ease the transition into a new school.

Some mobility could be prevented if students and parents were better informed about the risks and rewards of changing schools. Latino parents particularly need information about the risks for their child in requesting a school change, because Latino students request such changes more often than non-Latino white students. Transitions to new schools could be improved if students and parents knew how to facilitate the move.

6. Having the Department of Education prepare a guidebook for school districts with actions they can take to reduce unnecessary transfers and to respond to the particular needs of transfer students.

Some schools actively encourage student transfers without considering the educational consequences. Schools may also do little to help integrate transfer students and improve their prospects for academic success. But some schools, both in California and elsewhere in the United States, have established interventions for transfer students, including orientation and "buddy" programs, to help them adjust more quickly and successfully to their new schools. The Department of Education could evaluate the effectiveness of these programs and provide information about them throughout the state.

7. Providing funds to schools to establish programs to improve the academic and social integration of new students in a school.

The Department of Education could also provide grants to schools to develop, implement, and evaluate "newcomer" programs in middle and high schools.

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