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A Policy Paper on Raising Student Achievement

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Moving Forward

Helping New York's high mobility students to succeed

Raising the level of educational achievement among low-income and minority students has been the focus of numerous public and private initiatives and public policy programs over the years. Myriad factors — social, physical, educational, and familial — have been identified to account for persistent low achievement among particular populations.

However, an important variable, *student mobility*, remains understudied and unaddressed in New York state. Student mobility is generally defined as movement from one school to another for reasons other than grade promotion. Students who are highly mobile move six or more times in the course of their K-12 education. (Rumberger, 2002) Mobility has an impact on most New York schools — rural, suburban, small city and big city. Research and studies over the years have demonstrated that mobility is a factor in academic low achievement that is both pervasive in schools and yet largely absent from public policy considerations. Low-income, highly mobile children often are caught in a web of unpredictable and sometimes chaotic living situations, disruptions in schooling, and inattention to basic needs. As a result, these students:

- require disproportionate academic intervention and support services (Fowler-Finn 2001);
- experience isolation impacting attendance and performance (Rumberger, Larson, Ream and Palardy, 1999);
- may require four to six months to recover academically after changing schools (Rumberger, Larson, Ream and Palardy, 1999), and students who move more than three times in a six-year period can fall one full academic year behind stable students (Kerbow, 1996);
- are twice as likely to repeat a grade (Fowler, Finn, 2001); and
- are at higher risk of dropping out before graduation (Rumberger and Larson, 1998), and 60 percent of high school students who change schools at least twice are likely to graduate. (Rumberger, Larson, Ream and Palardy, 1999)

Individual school achievement is affected as well. Schools may see negative effects over time on the students who remain in their classrooms (Hanushek, et al., 2004; Kerbow, 1996), with a measurable achievement gap between schools with high mobility rates and more stable schools. (Kerbow, 1996; Popp, Stronge, and Hindman, 2003; Schafft, 2002)

The Face of Mobility

High mobility is most prevalent among poor and high-needs students, giving rise to persistent low academic achievement and a depletion of social and family capital that students can draw on in school and in life. (Hanushek, et al., 2004; Rothstein, 2004; Schafft, 2002)

In some cases, students show lower academic performance before switching schools. This suggests additional variables affect learning, such as limited family resources, life course changes, socioeconomics and enrollment in low-performance schools. (Kerbow, 1996)

Inner-city students, the most vulnerable group of children affected by high mobility, are more likely to change schools often. (United States General Accounting Office, 1994)

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Past Studies Identified Mobility as a Problem in New York City Schools

The effects of student mobility in New York City public schools were identified in a study more than 40 years ago, at which time mobility was cited as a significant obstacle to student achievement. The study found significant differences in academic achievement between children who do not change schools and children who change schools more than two times. Transferring students to racially balance schools added to the high mobility rate. The study recommended that the city take steps to assure students an uninterrupted educational experience. (Justman, 1965)

Eighteen New York City elementary schools participated in the conducted study from 1959 to 1962. Non-transient third-grade students performed significantly higher than their transient classmates in 1959. The difference in academic achievement between the non-transient and transient children three years later in sixth grade was even more significant than in third grade. Non-transient students exhibited a relative constancy in mean aptitude scores between third and sixth grade, while transient students lagged behind. The demographics remained relatively constant: 30 percent Puerto Rican, 52 percent black, and 18 percent others. (Frankel, Forlano, 1967)

New York City's highest transience rates were found in schools in the city's most economically depressed neighborhoods — those with the highest number of black and/or Puerto Rican children. The findings called for extensive study and early identification of student mobility and systematic remediation of mobile children. (New York City Board of Education Census of School Population, Oct. 31, 1963, cited by Frankel and Forlano, 1967)

Elementary school students in Community School District #17 (Crown Heights, Bedford-Stuyvesant and East Flatbush) participated in a study from 1981 to 1982 to determine the effect of student mobility on reading and math scores. The student mobility rate of this large non-English-speaking, high-percentage Title I population was 49.4 percent. The demographics at that time were 85 percent black (African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Hispanics), 12 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Asian and .5 percent white. The study found student mobility an important intervening variable in student achievement. Children from single-parent homes moved twice as frequently and demonstrated lower academic achievement than children from two-parent families. Teachers also had lower expectations of children entering classrooms mid-semester. The study acknowledged potential contributing factors impacting academic achievement of mobile children, such as the reason for the move, the social direction of move, and the condition of the neighborhood and family dynamics. Recommendations were made for revision of school services and educational curriculum, further study and tracking of student mobility, and development of programs to ensure uninterrupted learning for mobile children. (Sewell, 1982)

Yet another study in 1991 was undertaken to determine the effect of student mobility on academic achievement and identify programs and services to ease the transition for mobile children. Low school performance by New York City school children on outcome measures was consistently associated with high student mobility rates across all grade levels. (However, attendance rate, poverty, limited English proficiency, and ethnicity of students and teachers were more highly correlated with elementary school performance.) High mobility at the high school level was the most important variable
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impacting student performance and a predictor of high drop-out rates. The overall New York City student mobility rate at the time of the study was 27 percent. The teacher mobility rate was 14 percent, compared with the state average of 9 percent. Once again, further study of student mobility was recommended to allow policymakers at all levels to develop effective strategies to improve school performance. (The University of New York, 1992)

New York State United Teachers also raised concerns about the lack of inclusion of student mobility data on school report cards, fearing schools — and teachers — would be held accountable for the performance of students who were not afforded the benefit of uninterrupted schooling. (Hernandez, 1998)

More recently, high principal, teacher and student turnover was identified at New York City P.S. 190, where only half of the teachers have been in attendance for two years. Almost all of the 500 students live below the poverty line and 10 percent live in shelters. Twenty-two percent of the students scored at or above grade level on the citywide reading test, and 19 percent scored at or above grade level on the math test. P.S. 190 is approximately 70 percent black and 30 percent Hispanic. Former New York City Schools Chancellor Harold O. Levy acknowledged student mobility as a problem due to circumstances beyond the control of the board. Teachers at the school believed early identification of school and home instability and academic intervention could have alleviated low school performance. (Holloway, 2000)

P.S. 105 in Far Rockaway, Queens is another school that has experienced high mobility and its effect on academic achievement. One hundred percent of the children here qualify for free lunch. Forty-seven new students entered this school of 600 students between January 2005 and March 23, 2005. Thirty percent of students in newly added fifth-grade classes were new to the school. This group of students scored a 22 percent pass rate on the fifth-grade math test. Transience has been cited by the school principal as a possible factor. (Winerip, 2005) The example of P.S. 105 demonstrates what the studies conducted over the past five decades have found: Despite curricular innovations, added resources, more parent involvement, higher pay and longer hours and school year for teachers, the effects of high mobility have been difficult to ameliorate.

Common Ground for New York's Public Schools

Whether present in large city or rural schools, there are common factors contributing to high mobility, and common effects. In upstate New York, for example, student turnover disproportionately affects poorer districts, with turnover in the lower-income districts nearly twice that of wealthier districts. Some upstate school administrators cite the high costs and complications of budgeting and planning for a transient student body as an additional burden placed by high mobility rates. Low socioeconomic status and the concomitant lack of affordable housing emerges as a leading factor causing high mobility in these districts, as families drift from apartment to apartment and from school to school unable to pay their rent. Some upstate school administrators note that it is common for a highly mobile student to enter and exit the same district and school two or three times during the school year. (Schafft, 2002)

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The lack of affordable housing throughout the state is a major factor in high mobility. New York state ranked fourth in the nation as the most unaffordable state for renters, thus increasing the likelihood of homelessness if families cannot find affordable shelter. (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2004) The statewide median income for renters is less than half that of homeowners. (NLIHC, 2004) In addition, city migrants — mobile low-income urban children moving short distances and changing schools many times within the same district during the school year (Nakagawa, et al., 2002) — experience unstable housing and family lives. (Kerbow, 1996) This paints a rather grim housing picture for low-income families who rent their homes and motivates residence and school moves in hope of more affordable housing.

In the classroom, high mobility rates may result in lower education standards and achievement for all students. Teachers in high mobility schools find new students in their classrooms on a regular basis who have not necessarily been studying what the other students have learned. Therefore, these teachers are more likely to review old material rather than introduce new lessons, and the pace of instruction may slow for all because of the need to bring new students up to date. (Rothstein, 2004) Long-term planning and adoption of innovative teaching practices and techniques become more difficult when students come and go from the school on a regular basis. The quality and the nature of the lessons and material that can be taught to all students is restricted as well.

Other Factors Contribute to Mobility

Research has found that between 30 percent and 40 percent of school changes are not associated with residential changes. (Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger, et al., 1999) “Push” factors, such as overcrowding, class-size reduction, suspension and expulsion policies, and the general academic and social climate, also contribute to student mobility. “Pulls” for students and families are schools with better academic programs, extracurricular activities, athletic programs, college placement, safe school environments, and better neighborhoods. “Clusters,” schools linked by students with a pattern of entering and exiting a group of schools during the school year, are formed. One study found two schools exchanging 128 students over two years. (Kerbow, 1996)

Public policy also plays a role in student mobility. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 encourages mobility by making students, especially low-income and low-achieving students, in failing schools eligible to transfer to a better school within a particular district or outside the district, if necessary. In accordance with NCLB, parents of approximately 183,000 students at 267 New York City schools deemed failing by the state will be sent notification letters and transfer applications to schools not identified for low performance. Some schools will be required to offer free Supplemental Educational Services to students eligible for the federal free lunch program. (<http://www.nycenet.edu/Administration/mediarelations/PressReleases/2004-2005/5-27-2005-14-18-59-538.htm>)

The impact of the emerging school choice policy has yet to be documented.

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Toward Better Education Outcomes for All

Highly mobile children face multiple challenges in their lives. They are vulnerable to abrupt, unplanned changes in home and family life and in their school settings. The result is that opportunities for academic achievement take a back seat to dealing with the vicissitudes of disrupted childhoods. While this problem manifests itself in students in classrooms across the state, the full scope is yet to be determined.

New York state has a unique opportunity right now to get a fuller picture of the nature and impact of high mobility in public schools with the goal to increase achievement among affected students. As previously noted, past research studies have recommended further investigation of this issue, with education policy targeted toward ameliorating the effects of high mobility on individual students and their schools. As part of the ongoing implementation by the New York State Education Department (SED) of the Statewide Student Data System, in response to NCLB reporting requirements, data on individual students is being collected from school districts. The new system will collect, store, analyze, and use individual student data on statewide, regional, and local levels. One of the goals for the system is to better facilitate the collection and analysis of local data, so that teachers and school administrators can have access to assessment results based upon individual student data over time. (Memo to New York State Board of Regents, June 2004, <http://www.regents.nysed.gov/2004Meetings/June2004/0604brd3.htm>)

These longitudinal data will provide information for policy decisions at the district and school levels. Student academic growth over time can be linked with the teachers, programs and schools attended. Longitudinal data provide better comparisons of schools than cohort comparisons, because school performance is based only on students who have been continuously enrolled in that school. (Christie, 2005)

These data can be used strategically to improve the lives of students at greatest risk for academic failure and social difficulties. As teachers and administrators are trained to use the system there are tremendous opportunities for them to track and analyze student achievement. The data also could be used to develop policies, programs, initiatives, and support services on the state and local levels to alleviate the effects of high mobility while addressing the underlying causes of student movement from one school to another.

When considering such data, it is important to note the distinction between the *mobility rate* and the *stability rate* in a school. The mobility rate is determined by tracking the number of student entries and withdrawals in a school year. Stability means the percentage of students who stay in a school for the entire year. While a school can have a high stability rate, this number does not tell the whole story. It is possible for a school to have high stability *and* high mobility. (Fowler-Finn, 2001)

It is important to consider mobility numbers apart from stability because it becomes difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of education programs and curricula if the students in the classrooms change over the course of the school year. In addition, school services may have little impact on the students who are frequent movers.

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Recommended state-level task force members

- New York State Education Department
- Head Start and early learning agencies
- Children and family service agencies
- Department of Social Services
- Public and mental health agencies
- Homeless shelters/housing advocacy groups
- Immigrant welcome centers
- Family law/family court system
- State teachers unions
- Statewide education associations
- Special education advocacy groups

The Road Ahead

The lives of highly mobile children often are touched by a variety of education institutions, social services programs, community-based organizations, and local government agencies. For this reason, the formation of a state-level interagency task force on student mobility could effectively address this issue. Such an interagency task force would be in the best position to emphasize the needs of the whole child. For the most part, these stakeholders currently act as discrete entities in relation to services provided to highly mobile children in need. *(See sidebar for list of relevant agencies.)* Interagency collaborations require that groups develop partnerships with other groups to meet a specific goal. This can be very challenging for organizations used to working in isolation on a narrower set of issues. The value of such a collaboration is that various agencies, organizations, and institutions can claim different perspectives and knowledge of a particular issue and can bring to

bear their experience and expertise to develop a fuller picture of that issue. To succeed, these collaborations also must be transparent to the public and the constituents they serve and ultimately accountable for their actions by the highest possible authority.

Perhaps the most important job of the state task force on student mobility would be forming and asking the right questions about student mobility and its effect on student and school achievement. Possible questions would be:

- How much mobility is being experienced across the state and in individual regions/districts/schools?
- What is the impact of high mobility on schools?
- Who is highly mobile?
- Why are students leaving and where are they going?
- When are the children coming into the school? Beginning of school year or midyear?
- Why are students arriving and from where?
- Are there identifiable patterns of mobility?
- Who needs the data on mobility?
- What communications vehicles are best for sharing information with target audiences?

(Adapted from “Students on the Move,” National Center for Homeless Education, 2003)

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A general model for the state task force can be found in an amendment to the School-Community Collaboration Act of 1994, which authorized a task force consisting of the many New York state departments and agencies that touch the lives of children and families. The goal of the task force was to advance the lives of children and families by, in part, “identifying ways to improve working relationships between and among schools, health, mental health and social service providers and agencies, youth bureaus, youth employment programs, local departments, and other state and local human service agencies with the goal of improving services to children and families.” (Laws of New York, 1997, Chapter 402)

While such state-level action is needed in regard to student mobility, it is the local schools and communities that bear the added costs of highly mobile students, who often come to school with a whole constellation of social, personal, and academic needs that must be addressed. This reality makes it imperative for local schools to have the resources, support, and structure to prepare for new students, especially those with a history of multiple school transfers. To better serve these students, the information gathered and resources marshaled by the state-level task force could be used as the basis to create school-based student mobility task forces. Under the auspices of the state task force, the local groups would include administrators, teachers,

school counselors, parents, and local government and private agency representatives, among others. Local task forces could, for example, connect schools in “clusters” to further examine why students are changing schools and explore how to reduce this pattern of mobility.

It is the recommendation of this paper that, as a first step, a state-level task force on student mobility be formed as the vehicle to best serve the interests of the children of New York. The greatest costs of high mobility are to the children themselves, who fall further behind as districts and local schools struggle with limited resources and support to help these high-needs students. New York’s children deserve an optimal education that will prepare them for successful lives. Giving the issue of student mobility the attention it merits would be a significant step toward delivering on that promise. ☐

How Districts and Schools Can Help Highly Mobile Students

- Improve school to school, and teacher to teacher, communication and record transfer for students moving from one school or district to another.
- Investigate how a district’s Title I funds can be used effectively in highly mobile schools.
- Review local decisions impacting mobility, for example, special education placement and disciplinary transfers.
- Flag the records of students with three or more moves to ensure they receive additional assistance or services and closely monitor their progress.
- Create a welcoming committee at each school charged with developing ways to ease the transition of new students.
- Develop connections with agencies dealing with housing, utilities, human and social services — entities with which highly mobile families have regular contact.
- Involve parents in monitoring their children’s academic progress.
- Provide counseling for parents about the effects moving from school to school have on children.
- Provide tutoring for transferring students to get them up to speed with the class.
- Standardize curriculum to reduce variations in content and instruction so mobile students can “catch up” more easily.

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