

When, how (and if) to change schools

It's always tough to be the new kid in the middle of the school year: to find new friends, adapt to new teachers and rules. But for more than 6.5 million students nationwide, being the new kid can be a frequent occurrence—and one that exacts a cost to their social and academic development and that of their classmates.

What Is Student Mobility?

In K-12 education, “student mobility,” also called “churn” or “transience,” can include any time a student changes schools for reasons other than grade promotion, but in general it refers to students changing schools during a school year.

It may be voluntary—such as a student changing schools to participate in a new program—or involuntary, such as being expelled or escaping from bullying. Student mobility is often related to residential mobility, such as when a family becomes homeless or moves due to changes in a parent’s job.

How Does Mobility Affect Student Learning?

Even normal transitions—at the start of school, sixth and ninth grades for example—can cause some students to stumble. Prior research has found students who attended K-8 schools have slightly higher academic achievement than those who attended 6-8 middle schools, and students are at higher risk of dropping out or having behavior issues during transition years like ninth grade.

Various studies have found student mobility—and particularly multiple moves— is associated with a lower school engagement, poorer grades, and a higher risk of dropping out of high school. Research has found students **generally lose about three months of reading and math learning** each time they switch schools.

The Summer Switch

Voluntary transfers, which are more likely to happen during the summer, cause less academic disruption and may be associated with academic improvement if they lead to better services for the student.

Choosing and Sticking to Your Choice in the Early Years

Mobility can be particularly hard on children in the early grades, as they learn foundational skills and build trust with peers and educators. A 2015 study found that the more often early elementary students moved, the lower they scored on both the state standardized math test, and on teacher observations of the students’ critical thinking.

Exhaust Your Options as an Advocate

You are an expert on your child and their needs. Before moving them to another school, which could impact their achievement long term, try working through the conflict as your child’s advocate. No one knows your child better than you; the school should welcome your presence and efforts to improve their experience and achievement at school. For tips, see page 194.

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Did you know?

With respect to academic achievement, students who change schools more frequently tend to have lower scores on standardized reading and math tests and drop out of school at higher rates than their less-mobile peers.

—US Government Accountability Office, 2010

Learning takes a back seat for any child whose basic needs are not met. Public schools in Cleveland have evolved to become community hubs, safe spaces that provide food, warmth, and support, alongside the work of educating students.

That’s why Say Yes Cleveland is more than just a college tuition program. It’s a strategy to provide support and unite our community in a common effort to help Cleveland students overcome obstacles and achieve future success. Placing core supports in schools will allow educators to focus on teaching our young people. And with their basic needs met, our students can focus on what matters most: getting the best possible education they can, and dreaming big dreams for themselves.

