

# Tips for Supporting Mobile Students

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In participation with the Virginia Department of Education

Information Brief No. 4 Revised Spring 2014

**M**obility is not a new issue for educators to consider, but the faces of the highly mobile have been changing. The focus of early educational research was the upwardly mobile student. From the 1880's through the 1950's, mobility was often seen as the result of a job promotion. However, since the 1970's, there has been a shifting focus with downwardly mobile populations receiving greater attention. Poverty factors and increases in the number of children in low-income



families have changed the context for looking at mobility and education.<sup>1</sup> Other factors that can influence multiple moves for children include corporate downsizing, sporadic employment opportunities, and changes in family structures and support.

What is a school to do? A little planning can go a long way to ensure that students who arrive or depart during the school year feel welcomed, accepted, and able to benefit from the educational experience. This information brief is intended to offer suggestions for division, school, and classroom level support to students moving frequently.

Whether the responders are teachers, administrators, or service providers working with children living in poverty, the basic answer consistently remains: "We want the child to feel safe and secure, valued, welcomed, and connected to the community. Achievement is important, but we know that we must meet some basic needs first."

"Highly mobile" is used to describe students who make six or more moves during their K-12 education that are not regular transitions (e.g., elementary to middle).<sup>2</sup> For students in third grade, this would translate into two or more moves during their education to date. Such students may include the children of migrant workers, military personnel, corporate executives, immigrants, families experiencing domestic violence or homelessness, and other unstable work/home situations related to high poverty. As achievement and high standards are tied to school accountability, the challenge of serving highly mobile students has gained greater attention. While specific needs of each child will vary, there are some factors that should be considered for all highly mobile students - upwardly and downwardly mobile.

Consider the following statistics:

- According to the 2013 census report, 10-14 percent of school-aged children changed residence from the previous year and nearly 9 million children changed their place of residence from 2012 to 2013.<sup>3</sup>
- Poor families move 24% to 77% more often than non-poor families.<sup>3</sup>
- Students who change schools the most frequently (four or more times) represent about 13 percent of all kindergarten through eighth grade students.<sup>4</sup>
- Students who change schools four or more times are disproportionately poor, African American, and from families that do not own their homes or have a father present in the household.<sup>4</sup>
- Mobility can harm students' nutrition and health, increase grade retention, and lower academic achievement.<sup>5</sup>

Reflect on your response to the following question before proceeding:

*If you only had a day, a week, or a month to work with a child: What would you want to leave with him or her?*

As well as academic achievement, school should be a place of safety, friendships, and support. Communicating this message to students (and parents) is an important part of the planning that goes into the opening of school every year. It is communicated through the rites, rituals and everyday procedures of the learning community.<sup>5</sup> Teachers, principals, and central office personnel spend significant amounts of time learning about each other and their students and working to establish smooth operations. Doing so early in the school year sets the tone for the remainder of the year. For highly mobile families and their children, the challenge is to provide “beginning of school information” quickly and clearly *whenever* there is a new arrival. How can you initiate relationships and communicate your division’s, school’s, or classroom’s culture throughout the year?

## Student Needs

The first step in initiating relationships is to identify the needs of students. One framework for looking at student needs is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need<sup>5</sup> illustrated in the diagram at right. Maslow theorized that needs at the lower levels of the pyramid must be met before the potential exists for fulfilling needs at higher levels. Physiological needs of students may include food, shelter, clothing, and medical attention. Social/emotional needs include safety, security, and belonging.

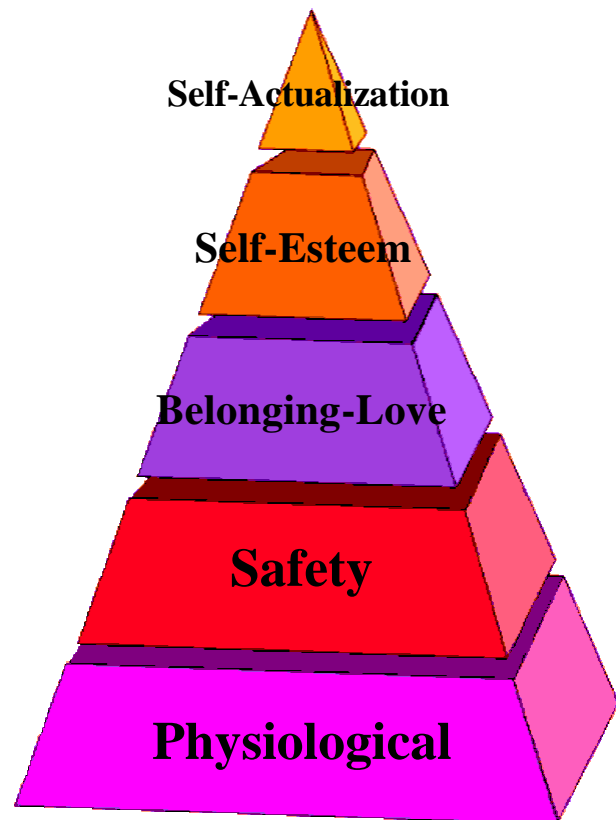
Mobile students may require assistance acquiring former school records, supplies, and access to transportation. To keep pace with the other students in the class, they may need additional instruction or remedial help.

Meeting the needs of highly mobile students is a challenge, but making a plan will help to ease the transition for the instructors and all students. Considering Maslow’s hierarchy may provide a useful framework for identifying the specific needs of your students. While not all may be feasible, school divisions, schools, and classrooms may wish to consider the following suggestions.

## School Division Support

School boards and central office personnel can play an important role in supporting highly mobile students and, in some instances, reducing the incidence of mobility in their division. Examples of actions divisions are currently employing include:<sup>7&8</sup>

## Maslow’s Hierarchy of Need



1. Establish procedures that ensure transmittal of school records in a timely fashion. Delays in the receipt of school records lead to delays in enrollment and loss of instructional time. Use technology to relay information quickly.
2. Create a parent booklet with transfer suggestions. Providing parents with information regarding appropriate withdrawal and enrollment procedures can shorten delays when moves occur. Checklists of important steps to complete at the old and new school can keep parents on track. The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) has developed a “Parent Pack” folder for maintaining important school records that includes checklists of items that should be included (see page 8 for NCHE contact information).
3. Allocate additional resources. Needy students can achieve with the increased academic support provided by smaller class sizes and additional teachers, free summer school to students not on grade level, and community homework centers.
4. Provide guidance to parents about the effects of school transfers. Develop brochures and public service announcements to alert parents to the academic

challenges children face when multiple school transfers occur. An example is Chicago's Staying Put Campaign<sup>7</sup> that encourages greater stability for students. Procedures to reconcile disputes that lead to school transfers within the district also may be reviewed or developed.<sup>8</sup>

5. Become involved with interagency efforts to provide families with resources needed to reduce mobility, when possible. Student mobility may be symptomatic of larger problems. Affordable housing, local jobs, and accessible transportation can be critical factors that affect mobility. Schools can educate policy makers and other community leaders about the impact of student mobility so that it becomes a consideration in the allocation of resources and planning.
6. Review and amend local policy, as needed. Enrollment policies may appear fair and reasonable. However, such policies may create barriers that prevent some highly mobile students from enrolling in a timely fashion. (Federal legislation for homeless students requires that all districts review and amend policies that create barriers for this population.) Allowing a student to remain in the school of origin following a move can provide valuable academic stability. (This option is legislated for homeless students. See Project HOPE-Virginia resources for more information on the McKinney-Vento Act.)
4. Create an orientation video for your school. Develop a video for new parents and students to preview when they enroll. Taking a virtual tour of the building, reviewing important policies, and introducing families to the faculty, staff, and student body can be an entertaining way to welcome newcomers. Students could participate in the video production, incorporating language arts and technology standards in the process. Consider filming in multiple languages if many of your families are non-English speaking. Have a comfortable location in the school for the video to be viewed and consider providing a copy that could be viewed at home.
5. Develop brief student assessments. Teachers may work in teams to identify and/or develop assessment measures that align with the curriculum at each grade level. In addition to providing a quick assessment for new students, the measures may be useful as pre-assessment tools for all students.
6. Create and train student volunteer coaches to orient new students. Such volunteers can be helpful in building community and can develop a buddy system at the classroom or school level.
7. Conduct school-wide acquaintanceship activities and contests. Principals and counselors may have "New Kids on the Block" lunches as an optional activity for new students. Have information booths at lunch staffed by students to explain extracurricular activities. Have a "welcome party" for new students and a "good-bye party" for those who are leaving.
8. Consider options for high school students that enroll late in the year, such as allowing them to enroll without credit and retaking the course next semester, or assigning an independent study for students who arrive very late in the year.
9. Consider an incentive system to ensure textbooks are returned. When families have to move unexpectedly, returning school supplies is not usually a top priority. Offering items that are donated by businesses (e.g., coupons for restaurants or goods) in exchange for returned texts is a positive approach to alleviating the conflicts that arise from records being held or other punishments.

*Feeling connected starts  
new children in the right  
direction.*

## School Support

1. Prepare in advance for incoming and departing transfers. By establishing routines that have been communicated to faculty and staff, transfers can become less disruptive. Involve faculty and staff in developing or revising procedures, and provide opportunities for training.
2. Have counselors meet with parents & student when registering. The personal contact provides a welcome to the family and an opportunity to start identifying needs through an informal conversation.
3. Arrange a parent follow-up with a counselor 2-3 weeks after enrollment. A positive contact with par-

ents a few weeks after enrolling can open the door to clarify questions that often arise after the student has begun attending school. Some parents may be reluctant to contact the school with questions, so making contact from the school is a good way of removing those barriers.

# Classroom Support

Teachers will have the most direct contact with highly mobile students and may find their instruction for all students changed by the effects of transitions in the classroom. This section is divided to address preparation before the student arrives, activities to use when the student enters class, and suggestions for bringing closure to departures.



## Before the Student Arrives:

1. Maintain a short written list of classroom rules and procedures.
2. Keep routines simple and relaxed.
3. Reserve an area in the room for children to display artwork.
4. Have a “home base” (e.g., rug or person) for a child to reconnect with something familiar if he/she feels overwhelmed.
5. Provide textbooks and trade books on tape.
6. Maintain homework/school supply kits. School or community organizations can collect items and prepare kits as service-learning projects.
7. Have a “welcome gift” – school pencil, writing paper, trade book, etc.
8. Make a “New Student Box.” Include:
  - a) Name tags
  - b) Precut contact paper or roll of tape to affix names to desk or locker
  - c) Marking pens – to label possessions
  - d) Extra labels for classroom charts (job charts, student of week projects, birthday charts, reading club, etc.)
9. Prepare “New Student Files.” Include:
  - a) Things to go home to parents
    - Classroom and school rules
    - Supply list
    - Extra sets of supplies for those who can’t afford them
  - b) Things for the child to use at school
    - Copies of general letters to parents
    - Class schedule and special classes (art, music, library, P. E.)
    - Activity ideas for home
    - Quick interest survey for the older child to complete
    - Primary level – “All About Me” drawing paper
    - Get acquainted form or project
    - Classroom and school rules
    - Classroom procedures
  - c) Checklist for teacher management
    - Update locker assignment chart
    - Update seating chart form
    - Update class list
    - Update lunch list
10. Have “reserve” snacks for any students who forget or can’t afford them.
11. Have class schedule visible so students will know what is going to happen next.
12. Develop short assessments for reading, writing, and mathematics in case records are delayed (e.g., curriculum-based tasks, reading inventories, current unit pretests).<sup>8</sup>
13. Make extra copies of materials for review when new students arrive without prior notice.
14. Create learning packets of background information and activities for “catch up” if students arrive mid-unit.
15. Have a supply of mentors (older students, faculty, support staff, parents, etc.).

## When the Student Enters Class:

Providing a warm, welcoming, and safe community is very important for all children, but it is especially critical for new members to the school and classroom to feel safe and welcome the moment they arrive at the school doors. Feeling connected starts new children in the right direction, establishing their place in the classroom.

Taking the time to play welcome games or similar inclusion activities can make the transition into the classroom more comfortable for the new student and the whole class. When students feel they belong, they have some ownership in their new room. New students must learn how the class operates and get a feel for the expectations and routines. Current students should be given the opportunity to build new relationships and recognize

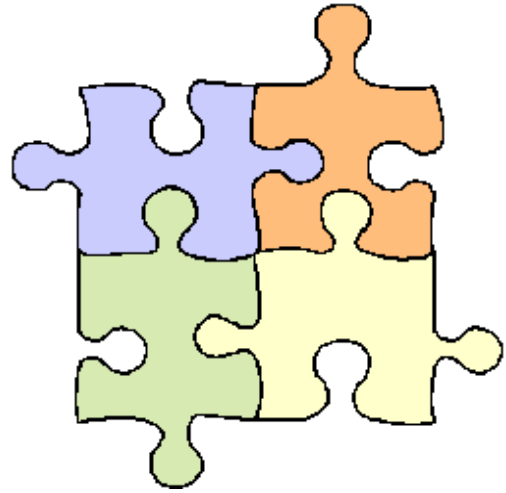
how classroom dynamics shift when a new person is included. This connection facilitates learning and the resumption of routines. Here are some suggestions to integrate the student into class and ease the transition for all.

1. Give a personal welcome to new students, introduce the student to the class, and make time to chat with them.
2. Introduce the student to others who arrived late and are succeeding.
3. Assign a buddy for recess, lunch, etc.
4. Arrange for an orientation during lunch or after school.
5. Use a “warm up” song to begin the day.
6. Have a daily “chat time” when students arrive to allow them to process their day.
7. Nurture social skills with structured activities.
8. Use a play telephone/play microphone to “tell” a friend how their day is going.
9. Give new students an opportunity to talk about themselves (e.g., interviews, story writing).
10. Provide activities that develop problem-solving abilities.
11. Use a digital camera to take an individual picture on the child’s first day and a picture of the child with the class.
12. Review their previous academic records.
13. Start a journal to send home if behavior problems arise (especially if there is no phone).
14. Start a file for students to take when they leave. (See next section for details.)
15. Use tutors/volunteers/mentors to provide one-on-one support. Even if remediation is not needed, this can provide a personal connection with someone else.
16. Closely monitor the educational progress of students with three or more previous school moves.

***Saying goodbye and letting go are as important as welcoming a new student.***

### **When the Student Departs:**

Supporting students in letting go and saying goodbye is as important as providing welcoming activities, yet it is a step that is often neglected. Instead of simply making an announcement when a child leaves, teachers and



schools can introduce activities that can support the students who are left behind and the student who has moved. Providing a formal goodbye, whether before or after the child leaves, allows the class to make a smooth transition and provides closure to the relationship they have formed. When a classmate disappears and is not discussed, students may create their own stories about why the child left. Dialogue may help students deal with the loss of a classmate and prepare them to welcome a new one. Children need to know that it is acceptable to have feelings and develop appropriate ways to express them. Such dialogue also supports students in reclaiming classroom safety and community after the departure of a difficult student. Letting go may allow for easier welcoming in the future.

1. Have classmates write letters to their departing peer.
2. Maintain a departure file with sample work that the student can take to the new school.
3. Have classmates prepare letters for the student who has left. They can be kept in the office file until records are requested if the move is unexpected or a forwarding address is not known when the child leaves.
4. Prepare a “Goodbye Book.” It can be as simple as paper stapled or tied together or as elaborate as laminated and spiral bound. Students may be given time to autograph the book and brainstorm with the departing student about special memories. Younger students can draw pictures with language experience sentences. Decorate with a digital picture.
5. Send the student departure file with the student (or place in office file as listed in #3). Consider including:
  - Exemplary work (laminated, if possible)
  - Journal recalling events from classmates (“Goodbye Book”)

- Individual and class photos
  - Self-addressed stamped envelopes to your school & class and stationery for the departing student to write back
  - A letter from the teacher introducing the student to his/her new teacher
  - Trade books the student has read
  - A note listing the similarities shared by schools to lessen anxiety of the unknown
6. Offer a Parent Departure folder to maintain records needed for future enrollments. (National Center for Homeless Education has created one that could be a model.)
  7. Use technology to keep in touch. Explore e-mail correspondence with the new class. Another option may be to provide the departing student with a phone card to call you once the family is settled.

## Ideas to Assist Parents

These activities can be coordinated through a parent-teacher group or staff members and organizations that foster parent involvement. Such activities are ways to encourage all segments of the community to be involved with the school, not just new families. It is important to remember when planning activities that transportation, entrance fees, or the cost of supplies may be an obstacle to some families.

1. Invite parents to visit the school for a getting acquainted time conference.
2. Provide newsletters or other communication (school and class level).
3. Send home good news notes for positive behavior.
4. Sponsor PTO/PTA school nights. Provide opportunities for parent, child, and staff to interact.
5. Share information on transportation to school events (e.g., resources, funds, local organizations that provide support).
6. Hold parent-teacher conferences at neighborhood centers.
7. Make home visits with welcome information about the neighborhood.
8. Encourage parents to volunteer for events. Provide specific dates and times. Coordinate resources (e.g., transportation, supplies).
9. Sponsor a Laundry Night at a local Laundromat. Provide quarters, pizza, and transportation, if needed.
10. Sponsor a health night where eye/ear exams and immunizations are given.



## Activities to Help Build Togetherness in the Classroom

While the following stress/challenge activities are used by elementary grade teachers, they may be adapted for use by older students, especially if integrated with academic content. They are arranged in alphabetical order with a brief description of each activity.

1. **Balloon Frantic** – Inflate 5-10 balloons. The object is to keep all of the balloons off the floor for as long as possible. A timer is started and everybody keeps the balloons in the air (not by holding onto

- them, only by lightly tapping or hitting them in the air). Every few seconds, a balloon is added. If a balloon hits the ground, the timer yells “1.” If another hits the ground, or if that one stays on the ground for more than 5 seconds, the timer yells “2.” When the number “6” is yelled, the time is stopped. Give the group a chance to come up with strategies to beat their time. Beach balls or other soft, big balls could also be used.
2. **Create a Game** – Each group sits in a small circle with designated equipment such as a ball, a rope, a hula-hoop, and three small beanbags. Add anything else you would like. Each team is sent to a separate area of the gym and creates a game or activity with the equipment. After practicing the game, each team shows its activity to the whole class.
  3. **Find a Partner** – Consider the following as a good way to find a new partner: Each person in the group has a partner, and the group is standing in a circle, each pair is in a “High 5” hand touching position. The teacher says, “ 1, 2, 3, Freeze!” The players must find a new partner and be in the “High 5” position. This can also be done as a fun elimination activity by having the rule that if anyone does not have a new partner or is not in circle. The game continues until all but two are eliminated. You could say that those who were eliminated can rejoin after doing something special, like 5 jumping jacks, etc.
  4. **Hands** – Everyone traces their own two hands on a large sheet of paper. They then write or draw pictures that describe how they want to be treated, and how they want to treat each other. Then, give each person a chance to read their words.
  5. **High 5’s** – Have partners come up with unique “High 5” sequences. Show them to the group. See if they can imitate them.
  6. **Moon Ball** – The group tries to keep a beach ball in the air for as many consecutive hits in a row as they can without having the ball touch the ground. When a person hits the ball, they cannot hit it again until someone else hits it first. You can set a group goal. You can also require that no one can hit it again until everyone has hit it at least once.
  7. **New Kids Club** - When new children enroll in school, welcome them in a short-term New Kids Club. The club is a voluntary opportunity for new students to bring a classroom friend/buddy with them to lunch bunches. At the lunch bunch, the partners eat together with other new students and a staff member and play get-to-know-you games. Varying the staff member will help the students become familiar with the adults in the school. It can be done across grade levels or one grade level at a time, depending on the size of the club. Students may attend for one to two weeks and are then encouraged to join other classmates.

### Adapted from

Staff Tip Book for Supporting Mobile Students prepared by Emerson Elementary School Staff, Madison, Wisconsin.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Smith-Jones, Y. D. (1997). *A comparative analysis of school-based performance of mobile and nonmobile students*. Unpublished dissertation. Williamsburg, VA: The College of William & Mary.

<sup>2</sup>Michigan Public Policy Initiative. (2001). *Spotlight on applied research: Families on the move*. Retrieved June 18, 2001 from <http://www.icyf.msu.edu/publicats/mobility/mobility.html>

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. (2014). *Geographical mobility: 2012 to 2013*. Retrieved February 16, 2014 from <http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/migrate.html>

<sup>4</sup>United States Government Accountability Office. (2010). *Many challenges arise in educating students who change schools frequently*. Retrieved February 20, 2014, from <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-11-40>

<sup>5</sup>Smith, J. L. M., Fien, H., Paine, S. C. (2008). When mobility disrupts learning. *Educational Leadership*, 65(7). 59-63

<sup>6</sup>Maslow, A. (1968). *Toward a psychology of being*. New York: D. Van Nostrand.

<sup>7</sup>Stover, D. (June, 2000). Schools grapple with high student mobility rates. *School Board News*. [<http://www.nsba.org/sbn/00-jun/0611300-2.htm>].

<sup>8</sup>Rumberger, R. W., Larson, K. A., Ream, R. K., Palardy, G. J. (1999). The educational consequences of mobility for California students and schools. *PACE Policy Brief*, 1(1). [<http://pace.berkeley.edu/PDF/PACE%20Brief-Mobility%20final.pdf>].

## Internet Resources

- Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) –  
<http://eric.ed.gov>
- ESCORT, Migrant Education –  
<http://www.escort.org/>
- Military Child Education Coalition –  
<http://www.militarychild.org>
- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children & Youth –  
<http://naehcy.org>
- National Center for Homeless Education –  
<http://www.serve.org/nche>
- National Military Family Association –  
<http://www.nmfa.org>
- Project HOPE – Virginia –  
<http://www.wm.edu/hope>

## Other Resources

United States Government Accountability Office. (2010). Many challenges arise in educating students who change schools frequently. Retrieved February 20, 2014, from <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-11-40>

National Center on Family Homelessness. (2010). *America's homeless children: New outcasts 2010*.

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Urban Institute. (2010). *Residential instability and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Children and Education Program: What we know, plus gaps in research*. Retrieved February 20, 2014, from <http://www.urban.org/publications/412115.html>

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## Statistics on Mobility

**10-14% of school-aged children changed residence from the previous year.<sup>3</sup>**

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**This and other information briefs are available on the Project HOPE-Virginia website:**

**<http://www.wm.edu/hope>**

**Project HOPE-Virginia is Virginia's Program for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. The College of William and Mary administers the program for the Virginia Department of Education. Funding is authorized under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act, Title X, Part C of the No Child Left Behind Act (P.L. 107-110). The purpose of Project HOPE is to ensure the enrollment, attendance, and success of homeless children and youth in school.**

*This document was originally published in 2001.*