

Why GAO Did This Study

Educational achievement of students can be negatively affected by their changing schools often. The recent economic downturn, with foreclosures and homelessness, may be increasing student mobility.

To inform Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA) reauthorization, GAO was asked:

- (1) What are the numbers and characteristics of students who change schools, and what are the reasons students change schools?
- (2) What is known about the effects of mobility on student outcomes, including academic achievement, behavior, and other outcomes?
- (3) What challenges does student mobility present for schools in meeting the educational needs of students who change schools?
- (4) What key federal programs are schools using to address the needs of mobile students? GAO analyzed federal survey data, interviewed U.S. Department of Education (Education) officials, conducted site visits at eight schools in six school districts, and reviewed federal laws and existing research.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations in this report. Education had no comments on this report.

K-12 EDUCATION

Many Challenges Arise in Educating Students Who Change Schools Frequently

What GAO Found

While nearly all students change schools at some point before reaching high school, some change schools with greater frequency. According to Education's national survey data, the students who change schools the most frequently (four or more times) represented about 13 percent of all kindergarten through eighth grade (K-8) students and they were disproportionately poor, African American, and from families that did not own their home. About 11.5 percent of schools also had high rates of mobility—more than 10 percent of K-8 students left by the end of the school year. These schools, in addition to serving a mobile population, had larger percentages of students who were low-income, received special education, and had limited English proficiency.

Research suggests that mobility is one of several interrelated factors, such as socio-economic status and lack of parental education, which have a negative effect on academic achievement, but research about mobility's effect on students' social and emotional well-being is limited and inconclusive. 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.

Schools face a range of challenges in meeting the academic, social, and emotional needs of students who change schools. Teachers we interviewed said that students who change schools often face challenges due to differences in what is taught and how it is taught. Students may arrive without records or with incomplete records, making it difficult for teachers to make placement decisions and identify special education needs. Also, teachers and principals told us that schools face challenges in supporting the needs of these students' families, the circumstances of which often underlie frequent school changes. Moreover, these schools face the dual challenge of educating a mobile student population, as well as a general student population, that is often largely low-income and disadvantaged.

Schools use a range of federal programs already in place and targeted to at-risk students to meet the needs of students who change schools frequently. Teachers and principals told us that mobile students are often eligible for and benefit from federal programs for low-income, disadvantaged students, such as Title 1, Part A of ESEA which funds tutoring and after-school instruction. In addition, school officials we interviewed said they rely on the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program, which provides such things as clothing and school supplies to homeless students and requires schools to provide transportation for homeless students who lack permanent residence so they can avoid changing schools. GAO did not evaluate the effectiveness of these programs in meeting the needs of mobile students.