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## Student Mobility and Opportunity to Learn: Money Matters

by H. Bud Meyers, Director

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### Background, Issues and Implications

Student mobility is defined as a child's movement between schools and districts after the start of the school year for reasons other than grade promotion. Student mobility is defined as a child's movement between schools and districts after the start of the school year for reasons other than grade promotion. Research shows that a high rate of student mobility greatly impedes students' academic success, and has significant impact on the schools' resources and ability to adequately serve their stable students and the mobile students.<sup>1</sup> This Brief discusses the issues related to student mobility, and presents implications for the recent policy initiative to enable school mergers.

### How Mobile are Vermont Students?

In 2005, Ann Morgan, Ed.D., completed a study of student mobility in Vermont.<sup>2</sup> She found that about half of Vermont schools experienced, on average, a 20 percent turnover of students in a given year. For some schools this figure is much higher. As many as a dozen schools saw as many as 40 percent of their students move in or out of their district.

### Causes and Consequences of Student Mobility in Vermont

A case study with six schools that experienced high in-mobility revealed that every community is different with respect to why and when a school would experience high in-mobility. Some schools experience this situation regularly, based on their community conditions; others were based on one-off event that occur in the community. We asked the interviewees to provide explanations for the rates of high in-mobility in their schools:

- Some communities have higher concentrations of low-income or 'Section 8' housing and tenants of low income housing have a higher than usual rate of default on rent payment.<sup>3</sup> Based on Vermont law, tenants cannot be evicted in the winter; therefore low-income students are often mobile after April 1st, the first day of spring.
- Some patterns of mobility are created by a one-off event, such as when new housing opens or when a company closes, downsizes the work force, opens, or expands and hires new employees.
- Some communities experienced in-mobility based on refugee resettlement programs that influence high rates of in-mobility to the schools.
- Some communities attracted higher rates of students with certain types of disabilities. For various reasons, these communities had developed programs to support better these children and their families. Therefore, sometimes families moved into these communities to be able to access these resources.

Another relationship that emerged from a follow-up study to her findings was that in-migration of students was often related to job or low-income housing loss in one town that was

**Student mobility is a real and serious challenge to quality education in Vermont.**

in turn related to low-income families moving to a neighboring community. Movement of students from one locality to another, termed in- and out-migration, seems to occur mostly within counties and across school districts. Mobility does occasionally occur within large districts and it does cross county lines when economic conditions encourage extensive movement.

The case study interviews suggested that high in-mobility causes increased stress on students, classrooms, and school and district resources. Morgan's research showed that in those schools that saw the highest rates of change in the student population there were often decreases in the levels of test score performance that probably reflected the change from one school system with a certain curriculum to another with a slightly different curriculum.

Morgan's research also examined variation in opportunities to learn among students at grades 4, 8 and 10, controlling for background characteristics like mobility. She found that mobile students, relative to their stable peers, were:

- more likely to participate in free or reduced lunch programs at school,
- less likely to have a 504 plan in place,
- less likely to have kept a writing portfolio for more than one year.
- less likely to have kept a math portfolio for more than one year, and
- less likely to meet the standard on mathematics performance tests.

## Why Should Vermonters be Concerned about Student Mobility?

Morgan and other researchers argue that student mobility is of wide reaching concern for families of low-income students, racial and ethnic minorities and special needs students in particular. These issues align under the heading of the loss of opportunity to learn that relates directly to differences in school programs that result from historical patterns of curriculum development and/or lack of resources. School budgeting is often based on the expected student enrollment from one year to the next. When significant numbers of students arrive over the summer, however, the needs for additional teachers and/or particular kinds of services for these students may go unmet. One particular finding of the research relates to the severity of the impact of movement on families with young children who have fewer resources to compensate for the effects of dislocation.

Young children with special needs for language instruction or psychological services are more vulnerable to abrupt changes to their connections with family and friends. Since many mobile students have not had the benefit of prior preparation aligned with their new school they often fall further and further behind their peers. The long term effects of these changes are unknown but they are probably related to the lack of success some children experience into adulthood. The merger of Vermont's smaller rural school districts could result in a more equitable distribution of public resources and the alignment of school curriculum across districts that would enable children to learn wherever they enroll.

Public policy that governs the organization and funding of schools can promote a solution to the problem of providing equal opportunity for children to learn. Northern Economic Consulting, Inc., recently conducted a study for the towns of Dover and Wilmington.<sup>4</sup> This study was described as showing that "larger high schools in Vermont offer greater education opportunities in core academic courses, fine arts, athletics, and extra-curricular activities than do smaller high schools." The study's findings do not directly address providing equal

opportunities to learn the content of what is tested on the state assessments. But, they do provide a basis for the concern expressed by Laura Sibilgia, vice-chairperson of the Dover School Board: "We are hoping to spur a discussion in the legislature about a programmatic definition of equal education opportunity.... We want to agree on what must be provided to all schools so that they may offer that educational opportunity. We want a system that provides Vermont taxpayers with an accounting of how their dollars are being spent."<sup>5</sup>

## How do Mobility and Enrollment Patterns Relate to School Mergers?

As the Northern Economic Consulting study suggests, school size is related to opportunity to learn. Both student mobility and changes in enrollment patterns can affect the resources available to schools. The movement of students from one school district to another affects resources by bringing students to a school that is often not prepared to meet their needs. The decline of enrollment over a period of years also directly affects the resource base of schools as teachers may be lost and services for high need students may be cut. Because these changes in the resource base are variable across a large number of districts and schools they may result in fewer opportunities to learn for some students and a surplus of funding for other students. A primary reason cited by the Vermont Legislature in **Act 153, "An act relating to voluntary school district merger."**, for encouraging mergers is: "increased opportunities to learn for all students, including the effective use of technology to expand those opportunities..". Larger entities for funding and budgeting for schools could

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**Laura Sibilgia, vice-chairperson,  
Dover School Board**

enable the reallocation of education support where it is needed in a timely way. According to exit poll data from a recent merger vote, citizens may be more likely to consider mergers if presented with specific data demonstrating potential improvements in curriculum, instructional quality and opportunity to learn.

## What are Options for Policy Makers and Citizens?

This brief provides evidence that student mobility is a real and serious challenge to quality education in Vermont. Policymakers, schools, and communities can utilize this information to address the challenges of student mobility, and work to ensure that mobile students are provided with every opportunity to learn and become successful, productive citizens.

### Recommendation 1:

**Stay the course on mergers.** Voluntary school district merger may offer one solution to the challenge of student mobility and the decrease in enrollment in several districts. Larger school districts with coordinated curriculum, assessments that are common across school districts and monitoring of special services can directly address some of the learning challenges of mobile students. Cost saving has been a controversial if not elusive case to be made for merger in several of the related articles and testimony surrounding the public discourse on the issues. But the costs of student failure are rarely calculated concerning the lack of common educational experiences among districts where students frequently come and go. Common curriculum and expectations for learning, coupled with adequate funding across the state can begin to save those costs to Vermont society that stem from inadequate preparation to enter the workforce and the inability of citizens to earn a living and pay taxes.

### Recommendation 2:

**Increase the data provided to voters.** Statewide electronic record-keeping would provide citizens in every district with more accurate tracking of student mobility and enrollment changes between schools and districts. Adding accurate and timely data to the discussion of mergers will better inform citizens of the gains and losses to be had from restructuring school districts to make them more responsive to changes in their demographics. Mobile students with needs to be met will emerge from the shadows of invisibility. In addition, the self-study of the background and potential of merger benefits should include an accounting for how well the proposed merger district could match standards of curriculum and opportunities to learn that would result in better outcomes for students. Students will be the winners from more responsive school organizations.

## End Notes

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- 1 Reynolds, A.J., Chen, C.C., & Herbers, J.E. (June 2009). *School Mobility and Educational Success: A Research Synthesis and Evidence on Prevention*. Paper presented at the Workshop on the Impact of Mobility and Change on the Lives of Young Children, Schools, and neighborhoods, National Research Council, Washington, DC.
- 2 Morgan, A. (2005) *Student Mobility in Vermont Schools: A Multilevel Evaluation of Education Equity* (Doctoral dissertation). University of Vermont, Burlington, VT.
- 3 Section 8 of the United States Housing Act of 1937 provides low-income housing by paying directly to the landlords a subsidy for the rent of a unit to low-income tenants.
- 4, 5 *Local Impacts of Vermont's Education Finance System*. (2012, January 17). Retrieved from Town of Wilmington, Vermont <http://www.wilmingtonvermont.us/index.asp>

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