

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*

Student Mobility: Healthy Transitions Information for Clinicians

Definition

As we attempt to close the academic achievement gap between groups of students, there is growing interest in looking at ways in which schools respond to increasingly high rates of student mobility. According to the Maryland State Department of Education, approximately 13 percent of Maryland students changed schools one or more times between 1998 and 2002; in urban areas such as Baltimore City, mobility rates are considerably higher. Many students change schools because their parents have found new jobs, better neighborhoods or housing, or because of family problems or problems associated with poverty. Others change schools because of something going on at their current school; their classrooms are overcrowded, they've been suspended (often, numerous times) or expelled, or they leave their school in response to a negative school climate. High student mobility is particularly prevalent in poor, immigrant, and urban communities.

Why do we care?

Frequently changing schools has been associated with:

- Academic failure
- Inappropriate placement within the school (for example, in a special education classroom when it is not appropriate)
- Nutrition, health, and hygiene problems
- Behavioral and emotional problems
- Poor school attendance
- Poor social supports
- Increased risk of dropping out of school

Note: There is some debate about whether mobility itself is to blame for the above problems, or whether it may be related more to the causes of mobility (e.g., family problems).

What can we do about it?

As a clinician, you can:

- Work with the school administrators to:
 - Develop a partnership with the Department of Social Services, Health Department, Department of Juvenile Services, and other interested community in order to create procedures for helping students successfully transition into the school.
 - Develop procedures and partnerships to meet tutoring, substance abuse, health, and mental health needs.

- Survey parents/guardians regularly for what they need from the school so that their children will be more successful.
- Expedite the efficient and accurate transfer of student records, and insure that the principal and teachers receive new student records as soon as possible;
- Encourage the development of small, personalized programs focused on low-performing and failing students, such as after-school and summer tutorial classes and enrichment activities;
- Encourage the use of multiple methods of evaluation; de-emphasize competition and grading by helping develop other ways of celebrating student accomplishment (such as through the use of portfolios, student art exhibits, etc.);
- Help the school become a welcoming community:
 - Develop clear procedures for meeting and greeting new families (and anyone who walks in the front door);
 - Consider using a bulletin board or designated area for welcoming new families and kids; include school information, pictures of new students, classroom location information, and school-wide support programs;
 - Develop a handbook and other information sheets to give to new students and their families;
 - Establish a buddy system, parent network, or other means of connecting new children and families with knowledgeable and supportive students and parents;
- Provide teachers with the time and resources to welcome new students and their families, and to work with cultural differences;
- Develop school-wide counseling and prevention programs that focus on problem-solving, self-esteem, and alternative responses to the challenges that often result in changing schools;
- Work with teachers to:
 - Reach out to students who develop attendance problems; help them develop a relationship with the students' parents or caregivers to determine what is causing the absenteeism;
 - Make their classrooms welcoming for new students and their families by encouraging them to:
 - give every student in their classrooms some responsibility for helping the new student feel comfortable and welcome;
 - make sure new students understand their classroom rules, behavioral expectations, homework requirements, and grading policies;
 - prepare for a new student by setting up a place and having materials ready;
 - take the time to meet with their new students individually, and to make contact with their families, if possible;

- Be creative and flexible; build on students' strengths by adapting material to make it relevant and meaningful to their life experiences;
 - foster cooperative learning through group projects and peer tutoring;
 - use more than one method in trying to assess the new student's learning style and needs.
- Engage you and other school resources *before* an attendance problem becomes a permanent separation or move; help teachers identify and refer children for counseling as soon as they become aware of a pattern of absenteeism or tardiness;

For more information, see:

Easing the Impact of Student Mobility: Welcoming and Social Support. *Addressing Barriers to Learning*, 2(4), Fall, 1997: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/easimp.htm>

Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. (2003). A technical aid packet on welcoming and involving new students and families. Los Angeles, CA: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/welcome/welcome.pdf>

Maryland State Department of Education (for a specific report on student mobility in Maryland): <http://docushare.msde.state.md.us/docushare/dsweb/Get/Document-50019/Student+Mobility+in+MD.pdf>

**Developed by the Center for School Mental Health (<http://csmh.umaryland.edu>) in collaboration with the Maryland School Mental Health Alliance.*