

Maryland School Mental Health Alliance*
Welcoming New Students
Information for Teachers

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. Many students change schools because their parents have found new jobs, better neighborhoods or housing, or because of family problems. 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 teacher, you can:

- Help to decrease mobility by reaching out to students who develop attendance problems; try to develop a relationship with the students' parents or caregivers to determine what is causing the absenteeism;
- Make your classroom a welcoming place for new students and their families:
 - Give every student in your class some responsibility for helping the new student feel comfortable and welcome;
 - Make sure the new student understands your classroom rules, behavioral expectations, homework requirements, and grading policies;
 - If you have enough warning, try to prepare for the student by setting up a place and having materials ready;
 - Take the time to meet with the student individually, and try to make contact with the student's family;

- Try to be creative and flexible in your teaching strategies; build on your students' strengths by adapting material to make it relevant and meaningful to their life experiences;
- Encourage 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;
- Consider keeping a folder or portfolio containing representative work of each of your students; if a student is transferring, send the folder with the student to take to the next school;
- If you're aware that a student is leaving, try to help with the transfer process; see if you can help to reduce the potential academic disruption by making sure the child's academic records are up-to-date and are transferred efficiently and effectively to the next school;

For more ideas about welcoming new students, 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.