The background is a dark chalkboard with several hand-drawn illustrations of books in various colors (yellow, blue, and red). Some books are open, showing pages, while others are closed. They are scattered around the central text.

The Goodbye Kids

The impact of student mobility
in Kansas City, Missouri.

TheGoodbyeKids.org

designed by  freepik.com

A reporting project by KCUR 89.3

Why are kids on the move?

If you spend any time in the classrooms where low-income children are educated, you'll eventually be struck by something that happens regularly — children move in and out of classrooms at a fast clip during the school year, missing days of school in the process and creating challenges for teachers.

What's going on? Why aren't children in school where they belong?

This booklet contains a remarkable set of stories which provide a real, on-the-ground understanding of this largely overlooked and underappreciated issue.

The stories reflect the tireless efforts of two talented journalists — Barbara Shelly and Elle Moxley — who took the time to be present with the children, families and staff at Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills School District, a small, largely overlooked, urban school district in the Kansas City area.

"Embedded" in a public school classroom, the journalists listened, learned, and shared the hopes, joys, concerns and anxieties of young minds there to learn and the challenges of those expected to teach them.

The stories taken together reveal, in a compelling way, this fundamental issue: many social factors play into the constantly changing classroom roster, and high mobility causes harm to children, teachers, and the community.

Considerable attention has been placed on improving public education in the past decade. Education reform has been variously focused on accountability, standardized tests, teacher preparation, and curriculum — activities largely involving the adults engaged in education.

Inadequate attention has been given to the fact that a significant number of children — primarily those in

low-income families — are frequently on the move, creating havoc in classrooms and gaps in children's schooling.

It is hard to learn when you are not at your desk, when — in a single school year — you are at your second or even third school, your second or third school district, your second or third curriculum.

Take the time to read these stories in full, because you will be informed by experiences and stories that may differ from your own. You will learn why:

- Dominic James Jr.'s desk, tragically, becomes empty one day
- Kaily Ross cares deeply for her children but struggles to keep her child in school because of housing issues
- Marcia Pitts finds it hard to retire and continues teaching into her fourth decade.

Even as we look for better ways to describe, analyze and understand this complex issue — known in educational circles as student churn or student mobility — we should not let the lack of an agreed-upon terminology diminish the significance of what is undisputed and undeniable.

Too many desks are empty. Children are on the move and not in school.

We are thrilled to participate in republishing and sharing these stories and hope it will encourage us all to do differently, to do better, and to do right by the children. There's much to be done.

Brent Schondelmeyer
Local Investment Commission
April 2018



Introduction

In Kansas City, one in five students moves at least once during the school year

A family needs to find a new apartment. A parent got a new job. A charter school seems to offer a better fit. Children change schools often and for many reasons during the academic year.

And yet student mobility is one of the great underreported challenges in education. Issues such as student achievement, teacher preparation, bullying and school choice command attention from school leaders and communities. Rarely does the conversation extend to classroom churn, even though it creates a state of flux that makes all the other problems more difficult to solve.

When leaders in Kansas City collected data a couple of years ago, they found that one in five students moves at least once during the school year, and those students have poorer attendance and lower achievement rates than students who do not move.

But that is only the beginning of the story. KCUR 89.3 wanted to know what all of this moving around looks like on the ground. And so we launched a project, originally titled “Musical Chairs.” Contributor Barbara Shelly spent the 2016-17 school year visiting Ingels Elementary in the Hickman Mills School District. KCUR staffer Elle Moxley added reporting from Ingels and others parts of the community. They documented the educational chaos generated as students moved continually in and out of classrooms.

We found that mobility harms all students — not just those who move around. It robs teachers of lesson time as they scramble to assess the academic levels of newcomers and introduce them to classroom routines. It leaves holes in classrooms as families often move without notice, forcing school personnel to track them down. By the second half of the year, classrooms were out of school supplies and at least one teacher was conducting an online donation drive to help her incoming students.

“I still haven’t gotten all my kids up to speed because of how fast they come in and out,” second-grade teacher Aubrey Paine told us as the school year wound to a close.



Barbara Shelly



Elle Moxley

“It gets really hard,” agreed Sabrina Tillman Winfrey, the principal at Ingels Elementary. “Teachers want to do their best for kids but they’re always starting over.”

As the school year progressed, we talked to families marked by transience.

“I went to four different high schools and I don’t know how many middle schools or elementary schools,” a mother, Sharonda Hooker Dennis, told us. She wanted a more stable education for her young son, but he was in his fourth school in five years.

And we spent time learning about Hickman Mills, which since the 1990s has transitioned from a thriving community of working families to an impoverished and neglected enclave of Kansas City. The instability and disinvestment that mark the neighborhoods are keenly felt in Hickman Mills schools.

The stories from our year spent in Hickman Mills are reprinted here. More conversations and voices can be found at KCUR.org. Click on Musical Chairs under the Special Projects tab.

Our hope is for Musical Chairs to become a starting point, not a conclusion. KCUR is pleased to have broken ground on this underreported but crucial aspect of education in the Kansas City community and elsewhere. We hope to join with others in continuing a conversation that may eventually lead to more stable schools and families.

About KCUR 89.3

KCUR 89.3 (KCUR.org) is Kansas City's public radio station and a charter member of NPR. The station holds itself to the highest journalistic standards in service to the citizens of Kansas, Missouri, the broader Midwest, and the nation.



About LINC

The Local Investment Commission (LINC) is a non-profit organization that works with state and local government, businesses, community and civic leaders to improve the lives of children and families in the Kansas City region.



About Hickman Mills C-1 School District

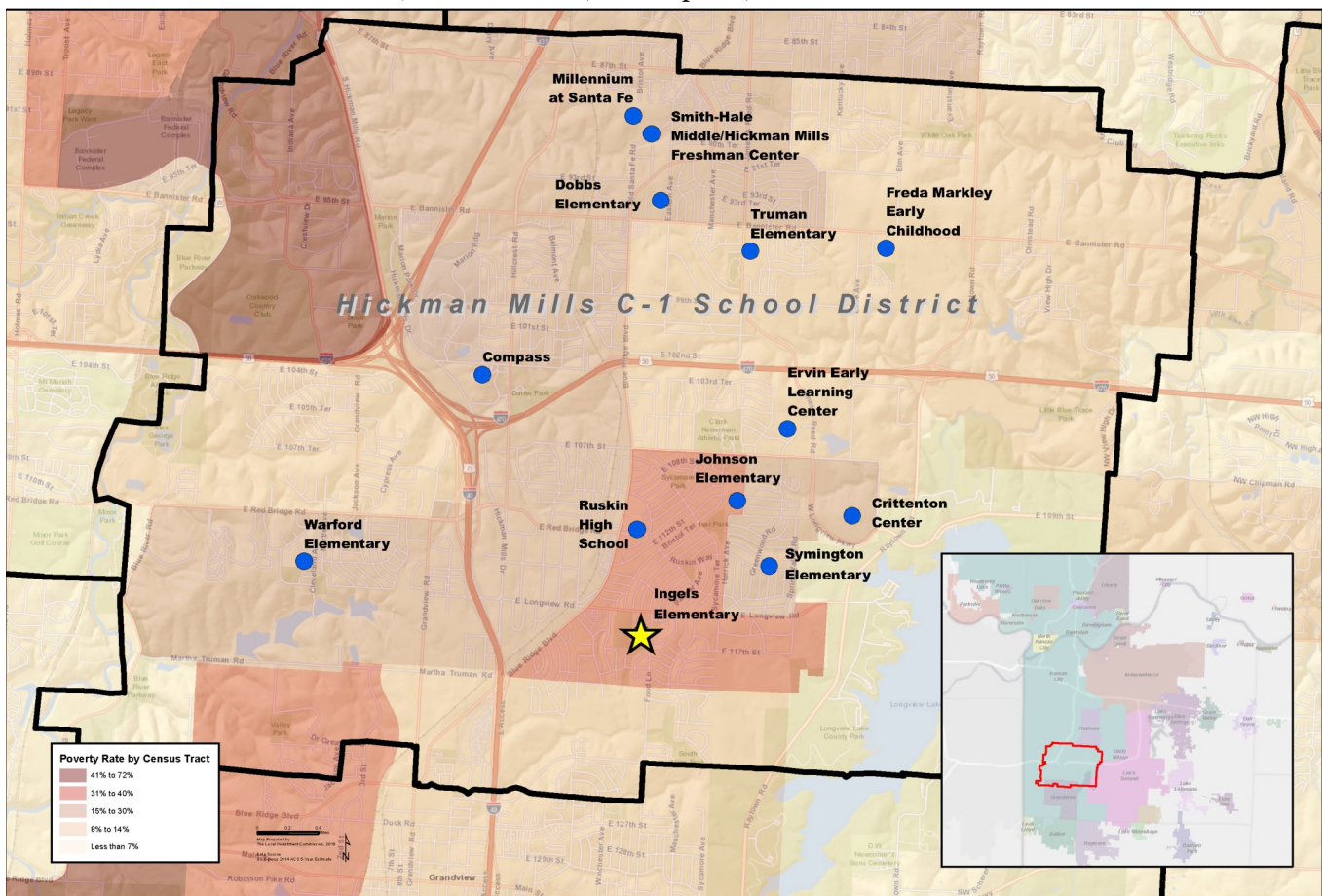
Hickman Mills C-1 School District made history in 1902, when the Hickman Mills area schools became the first consolidated school district in Missouri. Over the past 100 years, the district has grown from less than 100 students to an enrollment of over 6,000 students.

The Hickman Mills area is a diverse, first-ring suburban community located approximately 10 miles southeast of downtown Kansas City and includes 56 square miles. The area developed in the decades following World War II (1950-1970) when Interstates 435 and 470 were built and postwar housing developed at a rapid pace.

The District's schools include two early education centers, eight elementary schools, one middle school, one freshman center school, and one senior high school. The District also offers one special education school, a comprehensive gifted program, an alternative school, and a new STEAM school, Compass.

The Hickman Mills C-1 School District is recognized as a provisionally accredited district by the Missouri Department of Education.

Ethnic diversity in the schools reflects that of the community. Currently, the enrollment in Hickman Mills schools is: 80% African American, 10% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 2% Asian and 2% other.



Welcome to two Missouri classrooms where many children might not stick around

By Barbara Shelly • Sept. 27, 2016

At Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills School District, children are lining up outside of their classrooms for the start of the school day. They know the drill; faces front, hands at sides, no talking. It's the morning after Labor Day, and most of these students have been in classes for two weeks.

For me, it's the first day of school. I'm here for the start of a reporting project in collaboration with KCUR, Kansas City's public radio station. We're going to get an inside look at a year in an elementary school. And we're going to focus on a significant but under-the-radar aspect of education — the frequency with which students change schools during the academic year, and the challenges that arise from all that moving around.

My plan is to observe two classrooms, a second-grade and a fourth-grade, on a weekly basis, and I'll admit to being a tad nervous. Will I get along with the teachers? What will the kids think? Where will I sit?

But when I report to Marcia Pitts' fourth-grade classroom at 7:30 a.m., I quickly learn I'm not the only newcomer to the class.

Pitts, a teacher with 42 years of classroom experience, 30 of them at Ingels Elementary, starts giving instructions while the students are still lined up outside of her door.

"Your morning math is on the back bulletin board," she says. "Morning sentences are in front." The children file into the room.

"Good morning!" Pitts says, stopping one of them. "Who are you?"

The girl, who has braided hair and anxious eyes, gives her name.

"Where have you been the last two weeks?" Pitts asks. The student mumbles something about being sick.



Backpacks line a wall in Aubrey's Paine's second-grade classroom at Ingels Elementary School.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

No one had phoned the school to report a student out for illness, and Pitts is skeptical of the girl's explanation. But no matter. Pitts also knows the drill, and so does every teacher at Ingels Elementary. Over the course of the next nine months, new children will frequently appear in their classrooms. Others will disappear, often without an explanation or a goodbye. The teachers' job is to move their classes forward despite the turnover.

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Ingels is known as a "high-churn" school. It serves an area of south Kansas City characterized by high poverty rates and a predominance of rental properties.

According to data compiled in 2013 by the Local Investment Commission, more than half of the homes within a two-mile radius of Ingels are valued at less than \$100,000. Families in the area earn less and are jobless more often than households in Jackson County overall.

Those circumstances add up to lots of movement. Families move because a landlord raises the rent, or a home becomes uninhabitable or a parent loses a job or gets a better one somewhere else. Whatever the

2015 MOBILITY RATE FOR AREA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

GRAIN VALLEY, 13.8 PERCENT
KANSAS CITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 73.7 PERCENT
HICKMAN MILLS, 61 PERCENT
BLUE SPRINGS, 23.5 PERCENT
LEE'S SUMMIT, 19.8 PERCENT
RAYTOWN, 40.8 PERCENT
INDEPENDENCE, 54 PERCENT

SOURCE: KANSAS CITY AREA EDUCATION RESEARCH CONSORTIUM

reason, Ingels Elementary in the 2015 school year had a mobility rate of 74.7 percent, according to a study released last year by the Kansas City Area Education Research Consortium. Of 10 faces in a given classroom at the start of the school year, seven would belong to different children by the year's end.

That's not the highest mobility rate in the Kansas City area, or even in the Hickman Mills district. But it is a defining challenge for the school, its staff and the students.

Later that morning, I leave Pitt's fourth-grade class in the midst of a lively discussion about a story involving dragons and walk the length of the hallway to Aubrey Paine's second-grade classroom.

She tells me she has 26 students on her roster but six haven't shown up yet. "Their name tags are over there waiting for them," she says. "We call but no one answers."



Teacher Aubrey Paine helps student Morshun Caldwell with class work. A couple weeks into the school year, six students in her 26-child roster hadn't shown up yet.

SYLVIA MARIA GROSS / KCUR 89.3

Paine is starting her fourth year of teaching, and her second year at Ingels Elementary. She began her career in Baldwin City, Kansas.

"Last week I got two new kids," she said. "One is from Puerto Rico and doesn't speak much English."

Paine's mission this morning is to get her class to divide peacefully into groups and work on activities devised to hone skills like vocabulary, independent reading and vowel sounds.

"Now, remember we tried centers last week and we just didn't have the right behavior for it?" she asks. "We're going to try again."

It goes better. Most of the children focus on their activities with a minimum of fussing. Paine agrees they've made progress, but says they have a long way to go.

Still, the year is young and the class has both challenges and potential. But what Paine knows — even if her young students are unaware — is that her efforts with today's class could be lost in the churn by year's end.

This longtime Hickman Mills teacher has witnessed economic slide

By Barbara Shelly • Oct. 11, 2016

Marcia Pitts lets her fourth-graders know they have a big job ahead of them on this Tuesday. Open house at Ingels Elementary School is scheduled for the next evening, and Pitts is preparing her students to write a short essay. The best of their work, she says, will be posted on the bulletin board outside of her room to show to parents.

The essay assignment is biographical, and Pitts has written a sample about herself.

“Let me tell you about Ms. Pitts,” it begins. “I am a fourth-grade teacher at Ingels. Let me begin by saying I love to travel. I enjoy being on the beach.”

With the dramatic flair she has used to captivate elementary students for more than four decades, Pitts expounds on her theme.

“If you want to see a happy fourth-grade teacher, put me on the beach,” she tells her class. “Oh, to hear the surf, to breathe the smell of salt water, to feel the sand between my toes. It’s so peaceful. It’s so relaxing. I could live on the beach, I really could.”

An adult in the room, like me, can detect a bit of wistfulness in Pitt’s recitation. She actually retired two years ago, but can’t seem to cut her ties with Ingels Elementary School. Right now she’s on a long-term substitute assignment, filling in for a teacher on family leave.

Demographics evolve

Over the first few weeks of the school year, in the rare moments when she wasn’t directly engaged with her students, Pitts filled me in on her long history in the Hickman Mills School District.

She arrived there 30 years ago with 10 years of teaching experience. At the time, Pitts said, about 70 percent of the district’s students were white. She was one of only 12 African American teachers in the district, and three of them were at Ingels.

The district’s demographics were different then. Many of her students’ parents were homeowners who worked at Bendix Corp. or Marion Laboratories or the former Richards-Gebaur Air Force Base.



Fourth grade teacher Marcia Pitts has observed the transformation of the Hickman Mills School District over the last 30 years.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

Parental involvement was off the charts. “We had a lot of non-working mothers,” Pitts said. “They practically ran this place when I came. It was hilarious.”

Parents distributed school supplies, copied and laminated papers and even took attendance, she recalled. “We had room mothers, they did all the parties, anything you’d need.”

Over the years, Pitts said, “I’ve always had very good parents and I’ve worked with them very well.”

But the stay-at-home moms have been mostly replaced by parents working one or more low-paying job and stretching to pay their rent. I’ve watched as they pick their children up from school, many wearing the uniforms of city sanitation workers, painters and food service employees.

“I’m tired,” one mother told a staffer from LINC, the agency that runs Ingels’ before- and after-school programs. “I worked overnight last night and I’m working again in 15 minutes.”

Pitts has observed the district’s transformation since 1986 from her perch at the blackboard.

“Around my tenth or eleventh year, you could see it start to change,” she said. By year twenty, we just had question marks. What in the world happened?”

The answers to her questions could fill a book. Hickman Mills provides a sad but fascinating study of how a community that once considered itself a working-class suburb rapidly took on the look and the problems of urban poverty.

About 75 percent of Hickman Mills’ students today are African-American, with white students and Hispanic students each accounting for about 10 percent of enrollment. Nearly all of the district’s students come from households poor enough to qualify for free - or-reduced lunches.

A declining tax base, inadequate state funding and what school district Superintendent Dennis Carpenter describes as “more than a decade of disinvestment in our school district and community” has left teachers like Pitts facing bigger challenges with fewer resources.

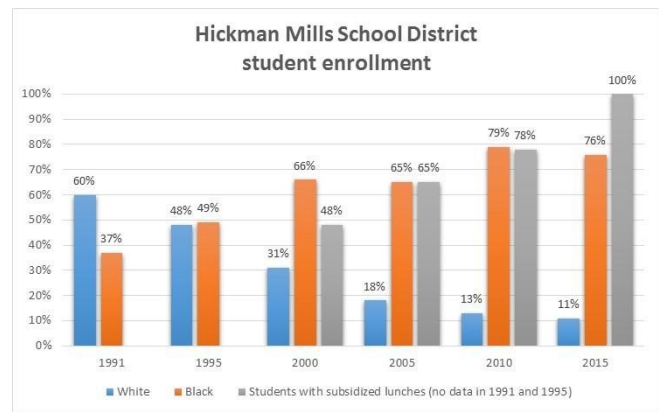
“This can be a difficult job and we have children coming from a difficult environment,” she told me.

Missing class

Pitts was worried that a couple of her students who had transferred from other schools weren’t keeping up with the class. And by the sixth week of school, one girl had attended fewer than 10 days of classes.

“It hurts because some of these children could make such enormous progress if they were here,” Pitts said.

The teacher’s desk was about to experience some mobility as well. The regular classroom teacher, Angelica



Source: Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education

Saddler, was due back the last week of September. “They’ll have a new face in front of them,” Pitts said of the students.

Hickman Mills provides a sad but fascinating study of how a community that once considered itself a working-class suburb rapidly took on the look and the problems of urban poverty.

But on this Tuesday, she was upbeat as she reviewed the class’s mini essays. “Oh, I like that,” she told one girl. “That’s attitude!”

Pitts collected everyone’s papers, eyed her students and delivered her verdict. “For your first writing

project I am very, very pleased,” she said. “I know your parents are going to be happy when they see these on the board.”

But the next night, the open house was lightly attended. Only a handful of parents drifted into the fourth-grade classroom.

Pitts takes these disappointments in stride. “Some days I go home skipping and jumping. Some days I go home dragging,” she said. “The good lord has blessed me to always see people’s potential.”

It's early days yet, but Hickman Mills teacher is already absorbing churn in her classroom

By Barbara Shelly • Nov. 2, 2016

Aubrey Paine is a second-grade teacher, the mother of a one-year-old girl, a Kansas City Chiefs fan and a technology buff. So it isn't as if she needs more excitement in her life. But lately she's taken to looking at her class roster every night, just to see what the morning might bring.

"We have all these new kids. I never know what to expect," she told me on a recent Tuesday afternoon. The newest student had joined the class just that day. You couldn't miss him: the shaggy-haired boy in soccer shorts, an athletic shirt and eyes that darted between eager and guarded.

Paine started her school year at Ingels Elementary school on Aug. 22 with 18 students in her class. Since then, the count has fluctuated almost weekly.

"I got two more students this morning," Paine told me three weeks into the academic year, when I dropped into her classroom during the school's open house. She opened her computer roster to show me the names and began to laugh. "Oh, I have another. I have another new one coming in the morning. Good thing I checked."

Such is life in a high-churn classroom. The Hickman Mills School District, one of the Kansas City region's most impoverished, serves a community characterized by low-income housing and mobile families. Ingels Elementary School has a 75 percent mobility rate, meaning that in any given classroom, three of four seats are likely to change ownership over the course of the school year as children move in and out.

Paine is in her second year with the Hickman Mills district, after two years spent teaching in Baldwin City, Kansas. At Ingels, the young teacher is respected for her classroom management skills, her unflappable manner and her expertise with technology. Recently,



Teacher Aubrey Paine uses tablets to teach essential reading and math skills in her second-grade classroom.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

she won a contest for the chance to learn a new reading program done on iPads.

"I was trained in one day. I'm like obsessed with it," she told me, practically bouncing with excitement. "I'm teaching the whole school (staff) tomorrow."

Ingels Elementary School has a 75 percent mobility rate, meaning that in any given classroom, three of four seats are likely to change ownership over the course of the school year as children move in and out.

At first, Paine's classroom grew as new students trickled in. But around mid-September she became concerned about a student named Jarbin. For two weeks he was absent from school, with no word from an adult. The Ingels attendance clerk phoned his contact number, but the person who answered spoke only Spanish. Finally

the school enlisted a translator, who established that Jarbin and his family had moved to Texas.

Paine greeted the news with mixed emotions. Jarbin had been a sweet student and he had bonded with another child who needed a friend. On the other hand, if he had popped back up in class he would have missed two weeks or more of crucial lessons, including writing detailed sentences and three benchmark

math tests. Paine already had her hands full trying to catch up the three students who joined her class in mid-September.

“I don’t know my numbers because I’m kind of new,” one of those students said plaintively one afternoon, after becoming frustrated during a math lesson and knocking objects off his desk. Paine assured him that he did indeed know his numbers and he couldn’t use his new-kid status as an excuse.

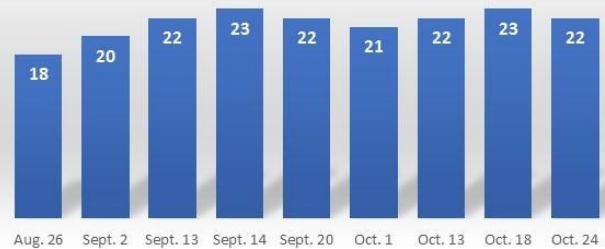
Soon after Jarbin’s departure was confirmed, Paine logged into her computer one night to see that another student, from Mexico, was expected the next day. Paine was scheduled to test students all day and a substitute teacher was lined up for her class. She sent an email to her list of parents, asking them to instruct their children to clean out Jarbin’s desk in the morning and welcome the new student. Her second-graders stepped up to the desk-cleaning job admirably, but the girl from Mexico never showed up. Eventually she was dropped from the roster.

Jarbin’s old desk is getting good use, though. A new girl joined the class the second week of October and a boy moved in the third week. Both had attended schools outside of the Hickman Mills district.

Also, a boy who’d been in the class since the beginning of the school year transferred to another elementary school in the district. His mother notified the school and the class was able to give him a send-off. But another boy mysteriously disappeared. After he’d been missing for two weeks, Mark Dayton, the school’s family resource specialist, knocked on the door of his last known address and found the place abandoned. He eventually confirmed that the child was enrolled in the Kansas City, Kansas, School District.

Students come and go

Aubrey Paine’s 2nd grade roster has fluctuated often in the first two months of the school year.



In her classroom the next day, Paine said she would miss the child. He had a pleasant personality and an aptitude for math. For the moment, his pencil box, crayons and notebooks remained stuffed into the space beneath his desk, as though he might be coming back.

Meanwhile, life in the second grade goes on. Paine is busy assessing the math and reading skills of the two most recent arrivals. In order to work individually with those two students, she gives the rest of the class assignments and hopes they can work independently. That doesn’t usually last long; these are 7-year-olds, after all.

Perhaps all of the comings and goings were in the mind of a student who hugged her teacher in the midst of a recent school day and said, “I don’t want to leave.” Paine hugged the girl back. “I won’t let you leave,” she said.

But she knows that is a promise she may not be able to keep.

Despite challenges, this grandparent shows up for everything at Hickman Mills school

By Barbara Shelly • Dec. 12, 2016

If an event at Ingels Elementary School calls for participation from parents, Shari Anderson is there.

Goodies for grandparents. Check. Anderson has legal guardianship of two grandchildren who are enrolled at the school.

Muffins with moms. Why not? She's mothering the kids.

Parent teacher conferences. Halloween trunk or treat night. School council meetings. At a school where the principal literally pleads for parental involvement, Anderson shows up for everything. She's the tall lady with the reddish hair who enrolled two children at the school in the Hickman Mills district a couple of weeks into the start of the academic year.

"I feel like I'm getting a second chance," she told me. "When my kids were growing up I really didn't have a lot of time to do anything because I was in the military."

Anderson's engagement in her grandchildren's lives and school seems admirable even before you learn what she goes through to pull it off.

Anderson, 52, struggles with a chronic form of leukemia called myelofibrosis. It leaves her fatigued and at risk for abdominal bleeding. It is the reason she went on medical retirement in 2009 after 14 years in the Air Force and several years after that working in military-related office jobs. Since then she's struggled to get by on disability payments.

She took guardianship of her grandchildren in 2012 when their mother, the oldest of Anderson's three daughters, was unable to care for them. Her middle daughter was living in the Kansas City area, so Anderson brought the children



Shari Anderson is trying to provide stability for her two grandchildren, who now attend Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills School District.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

here. Lacking money and a place to stay, they sought help at the City Union Mission and spent a couple of years in the long-term family care program.

Like many of their classmates at Ingels Elementary, Anderson's grandchildren have moved around. They started out at an elementary school in Kansas City near the shelter. Last spring, seeking a more stable situation, Anderson moved with the children to San Diego and enrolled them in school there. That arrangement didn't work out, so they moved back to Kansas City.

Like many of their classmates at Ingels Elementary, Anderson's grandchildren have moved around. They started out at an elementary school in Kansas City near the shelter. Last spring, seeking a more stable situation, Anderson moved with the children to San Diego and enrolled them in school there. That arrangement didn't work out, so they moved back to Kansas City.

After a short stop back at the City Union Mission,

Anderson stayed for awhile in a motel near Ingels Elementary. She enrolled Isaiah in second-grade and Nevaeh in third grade. Then her middle daughter and son-in-law found a rental home in the Hickman Mills

School District. Anderson and the grandchildren moved in to share rent.

Isaiah and Nevaeh are happy in their classes and doing well. That may have something to do with Anderson's coaching. She talks to Isaiah about controlling his temper and counsels Nevaeh about making good choices. She insists they do their homework and read every night, seeking out books at libraries and thrift shops.

"We all sit down and eat dinner together every night," Anderson told me, when we talked at her home.

"Well, we don't have a table yet," she amended. But everyone finds a seat somewhere and eats and talks.

Anderson has no car. So unless she can borrow her daughter's vehicle, she relies on city buses to get to the children's school and her medical appointments. When we visited she had a cast on her left hand -- the result of a tumble in a rutted parking lot at a neighborhood strip mall. She broke three fingers.

The obstacles seem daunting, but Anderson shrugs them off. Over her lifetime she has dealt with an abusive relationship, substance abuse among family members, homelessness and now illness.

"I'm of the belief that the life experiences I've gone through are not just for me," she said. "If I can offer any encouragement or hope to someone I think it's my responsibility to share. I've never allowed my circumstances to define who I am."

Her one wish is that life will be easier for her grandchildren.

"Being a grandmother is amazing," she said. "I was there when Isaiah and Nevaeh were born. There's nothing more beautiful I've experienced in my life than to see them come into the world."

Anderson wants more than anything to provide stability for her grandchildren. But more changes may be coming.

Anderson controls her illness with daily medications, but eventually she will need a bone marrow transplant. She'll probably have to spend a few months in Seattle, where she would have the procedure at a Veterans Administration hospital. That will require more decisions about care for Isaiah and Nevaeh; Anderson hopes they can stay in Kansas City.

Even if they remain in Hickman Mills, the children may have to move to a new school next year. Their rental home is outside of the boundaries for Ingels Elementary.

"I'm of the belief that the life experiences I've gone through are not just for me," she said. "If I can offer any encouragement or hope to someone I think it's my responsibility to share. I've never allowed my circumstances to define who I am."

For this school year, the family falls under the protective umbrella of the McKinney-Vento homeless assistance program. A partnership among the federal government, states and school districts, McKinney-Vento provides resources for children who at some point in the school year have met the definition of homelessness.

About 200 of the Hickman Mills district's nearly 6,000 students fit the guidelines.

Anderson's family qualifies because they were living in a motel when they enrolled in classes. One benefit — a big one — is that children can remain in the same school even if they move outside of its attendance zone. But that privilege expires at the end of the school year.

In facing uncertain circumstances, Anderson and her grandchildren have plenty of company at Ingels Elementary. This is a school where children move in and out of classrooms frequently. Many families don't even notify the school that they've left.

That wouldn't be the case with Anderson, who loves to drop in at the school and check on her grandchildren.

"To me, everything is about these kids," she said. "I think their success in school depends on me. I've learned that kids need one adult they can depend on."

That will be her, she said. No matter how many obstacles life throws out.

With flood of new students ahead of break, Hickman Mills school is running out of room

By Barbara Shelly • Dec. 22, 2016

Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills district marked the days before the holiday break with a concert, a chance to spray the principal with silly string and enough cookies and candy canes to vault children into the new year on a sugar high.

Like teachers everywhere, the faculty was visibly relieved as the closing bell drew near. But this group may need the break more than their peers in some other schools. As the principal, Sabrina Winfrey, told parents at the start of the concert, featuring third- and fourth-graders, “this year has been a bit different.”

I’ve visited Ingels Elementary frequently since the start of the school year, watching how poverty and high rates of student churn affect children, teachers and school communities.

The Hickman Mills School District in south Kansas City serves a community that has become increasingly isolated and cut off from prosperity. Homes that once belonged to middle-income families have become battered rental properties owned mostly by absentee landlords. Most parents work one or more service industry jobs. The student enrollment is constantly in flux.

Ingels Elementary started the school year with more new students than usual. The Hickman Mills district converted two of its formerly neighborhood-based elementary buildings into magnet-type schools specializing in math, science and technology. The move provided an attractive option for some district families, but it displaced others.

Nearly 200 children who had formerly attended the converted schools ended up at Ingels. Teachers — many of them new as well — spent the first half of the year reinforcing the school’s culture and expectations. It wasn’t easy.

Then, right after the Thanksgiving break, a flood of new students entered the school.



At Ingels Elementary School, third-and fourth-grade students head into winter break with a holiday concert for family and friends.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

*“I’ve never seen it like this before,”
Connie Sistrunk, the longtime
attendance clerk, told me. “I’m enrolling
one or two a day. We’re running out of
room.”*

“I’ve never seen it like this before,” Connie Sistrunk, the longtime attendance clerk, told me. “I’m enrolling one or two a day. We’re running out of room.” In all, about 20 students enrolled between Thanksgiving and Christmas — usually a time of low turnover. The student population now tops 500.

In the fourth grade, teacher Angelica Saddler added two new students, bringing her roster to 30 in a classroom that already had seemed too small. Saddler, a teacher with four years of experience, returned to work from family leave in late September, with an infant at home and a formidable task at school. Most of her students are below their grade level in reading and math. Many days she feels like she spends more time on classroom management than on actual teaching.

But Saddler — who showed up for the evening concert to watch her students — told me she was looking forward to a fresh start after the holiday. The break, she



Teacher Aubrey Paine and her second-graders play a game as part of their holiday party celebration. Only 12 of Paine's 23 students show up for the half-day of school on Wednesday.

BARBARA SHELLY / KCUR 89.3

said, would give her a chance to impose more routine and expectations when students return.

On Wednesday, a half-day for students before the start of winter break, only 12 of the 23 children in Aubrey Paine's second grade showed up for the planned classroom party. As her students munched on treats sent by parents and watched a movie starring Dr. Seuss's "Grinch," Paine seemed worried not about getting new children, but about one she was about to lose.

A girl who had come into the class in October hadn't been in school for the last week and a half, the teacher said. The child's mother never provided the required proof of residency to the school district, and she was to be dropped from the roster at the end of that day.

"She's so great," Paine said of the student. "I can't afford to lose her."

Thinking about the year so far, Paine said she is pleased many of her students are testing at or close to grade level. But others haven't made progress.

"They're not here enough," she said.

Attendance, like mobility, is one of the school's struggles. Winfrey addressed the issue at the holiday concert, as she does every time she addresses parents.

"I ask you to have your kids here on time and to let them stay the entire school day," she said. If winter clothing was an issue, the school could provide coats, hats, boots — anything to get children out of their homes and into the building, Winfrey said. "School starts on January 4 and we need them here."

But in this high-churn district, that's never a given. In Saddler's fourth-grade classroom, I asked one of the students why she wasn't at the holiday concert.

"I was packing," she said.

I asked if she was going on a trip. She shook her head. "Moving," she said matter-of-factly. When I asked if she would be returning to Ingels, she said she didn't know.

A wild day in the Hickman Mills school enrollment office

By Barbara Shelly • Jan. 10, 2017

It is late morning, and Barb Wunsch limps a bit as she emerges from her office in the enrollment area of the Hickman Mills School District. Twice already she's banged her knee on the corner of her desk in the process of jumping up to cope with a new situation.

Outside of her office, at least a dozen people sit at tables. The adults busily sort through piles of papers and fill out forms. Children color or read the children's books on hand in the office. Wunsch moves among the tables, dispensing advice, checking on documents and admiring a newborn in a baby carrier.

It's the first school day after winter break, and families have been on the move. Parents were waiting for Wunsch when she got to work at 7:30 a.m. at the district's Baptiste Center and they never stopped coming.

A family was moving in from Wichita, Kansas. Another from Topeka, Kansas. A couple was taking custody of children who had been living in the Springfield, Missouri, area. Another mother said her kids had last attended school in Franklin County, near St. Louis, but they'd missed most of December because of an unexpected move.

More plentiful are families who had relocated from area neighborhoods served by other school districts, like Kansas City, Kansas; Raytown and Grandview in Missouri. At least a dozen parents were transferring children from the Kansas City Public Schools or charter schools. Others were simply moving within the Hickman Mills district.

"We just tend to have a very transient population in the Hickman Mills area," Wunsch said. "We have a lot of rental properties, a lot of Section 8 housing. We have families who live in hotels. A lot of families double up."



Barbara Wunsch, the residency coordinator for Hickman Mills School District, talks to Yohana Gomez, a freshman who started the school year in the district before moving to a school in Kansas City, Kansas.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

Wunsch has handled residency and enrollment issues for the district for 18 years. In that time, her job has only become more intense as the district's housing stock has become older and its population poorer.

The first week or so after winter break is her second busiest period, right behind late summer, when families enroll for the upcoming school year.

By early afternoon on Wednesday, all of the seats at the tables in the outer office were occupied. Roxane Odneal, the receptionist at the Baptiste Center, scrambled to find folding chairs and clipboards for people crowding a second waiting area.

After families fill out a sheath of forms, Wunsch checks to make sure everything is in order. At a minimum she needs birth certificates, proof of residency and shot records. Many families need to document that they have legal custody of a child. Every situation is different and many of them are complicated.

"We just tend to have a very transient population in the Hickman Mills area . . . We have a lot of rental properties, a lot of Section 8 housing. We have families who live in hotels. A lot of families double up."



Kimberly Carrell reads to her son, Brandon, and daughter, Naomi, in the admissions office. Carrell says she moved a lot as a kid and wants to keep the kids in the same school district.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

“This is where the frustration sets in,” Wunsch tells me, as she surveys the growing crowd. She is big on customer service and hates to keep people waiting.

On this day, though, most people don’t seem to mind. Kids share games and toys and parents and grandparents swap stories. Those stories help to explain why the Hickman Mills School District’s churn rate — the number of students who move in and out in relation to the start-of-the-school-year attendance count — is the second highest in the region, behind only the Kansas City Public Schools.

Yohanna Gomez, formerly of El Salvador, wanted to re-enroll in the district’s Freshman Center. She had attended classes there when school started in the fall, but moved in with relatives in Kansas City, Kansas, after clashing with her parents. Yohanna wasn’t happy in her new high school and decided to move back home. She was looking forward to rejoining her friends in Hickman Mills.

Cecily Winda was enrolling three boys, ages 10, 8 and 7, in a Hickman Mills elementary school. It will be their third school in a year’s time, following stays in Raytown and Grandview. “They were just getting comfortable in their old school,” said Winda, who works at a call center. But she found an affordable house in Hickman Mills — one with three bedrooms, a patio and a full basement. She hopes it will be her last move.

A grandmother arrived with elementary-age children who had attended schools in Texas and California.

“Where’s Mom?” Wunsch asked.

“She’s homeless,” the grandmother said.

Shortly before 3 p.m., the admissions office took on an international cast.

Natalia Shupe, who moved here several years ago from Moldova in Eastern Europe, came to re-enroll her kindergarten-age son, Mickey, who was dropped from the rolls when he missed too many school days because of ear infections and other problems.

Families from El Salvador and Mexico sat at tables filling out forms with the help of district-provided translators.

Galen Turner, from Jewish Vocational Services, arrived with a family from Syria. The refugee relocation agency initially found the family housing in Kansas City’s northeast neighborhood. Now the parents have chosen to move to south Kansas City, where a Syrian community seems to be getting established, he said.

Wunsch verified that. A landlord in the district is willing and eager to rent to Syrian families, she said. She’s seen several families already and expects to see more. For students who don’t speak English, the district provides language help for one year.

By 5 p.m., the office is cleared out. Some of the parents will have to return the next day with paperwork. Most will take their children to their assigned new schools, where they may or may not land quickly in a classroom. Staffers must obtain transcripts and other records from the students’ most recent schools. Students transferring to middle and high schools will need schedules.

For Wunsch and her families, it’s been a long day in the admissions office. But the problems with moving around don’t stop when a family clears the paperwork hurdles. A recent study by the Kansas City Area Education Research Consortium showed that students who switch schools in midyear are significantly less likely to score as “proficient” or higher on state assessment tests than their peers. Some studies suggest that churn in the classroom even affects students who don’t move.

But there is research, and there is reality. Children in low-income neighborhoods are forced by circumstances to move frequently. Wunsch expects a busy January and another rush of families after spring break.

“I continue enrolling students up until the last week of school,” she said.

For this Hickman Mills mom and her son, elementary school is a hope for stability

By Barbara Shelly • Jan. 17, 2017

Kaily Ross rocked a baby stroller as she talked to the staffers who run the after-school program at Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills district.

Could her older son, the third-grader she was enrolling in the LINC program that day, still get in the flag football activity? What else did they offer?

It was a few weeks after the start of the school year and Ross's son was transferring from another area district. When I asked how many schools he had attended to that point she sighed and said, "There have been so many."

Later, we added them up. The move to Ingels Elementary marked the seventh time that Jeremiah has walked into a new classroom, although he has cycled in and out of the same elementary school in Independence three different times.

His mom, who herself left school in the eleventh grade, regrets the instability. The moving around has created stress for her son and made it hard for him to make friends, she says.

Life has rarely been easy for Ross, who is 32, but as recently as 2014 she was living in an apartment, working in a warehouse and paying her rent early. That year she gave birth to a second son. The delivery required a cesarean section and a longer recovery than Ross and her employer had figured on. She also went through a bout of postpartum depression. The result was a lost job, unpaid rent and an eviction.

Ross didn't realize at the time that the eviction would thrust her family into homelessness. She moved in with relatives for awhile and then traveled with family members to Seattle, hoping to get a fresh start there. But expenses on the West Coast were too high, so Ross returned with her children to Kansas City and spent a few months couch surfing and living in a



Kaily Ross wishes she could spend more time at Ingels Elementary School, where her son is in the third grade.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

cheap motel. Finally she sought help at a family shelter.

"I want to give some major props to the Salvation Army, because that's where I went. They were amazing," Ross told me. "I was scared because I didn't know

what to expect. I thought a shelter was for somebody else but not me. Then I found out everyone there was just like me."

All this time, while working a series of low-paying jobs, she was on the phone with landlords and property managers, trying to find a place to stay.

"I probably called 100 to 200 property managers. I

was desperately looking for housing," Ross said.

The experience was demeaning. Ross had saved enough money for a deposit on rent, but that was canceled out by the eviction on her record. "They were very rude when they heard that," she said. "Even if you have money in your pocket, they don't want to talk to you."

The move to Ingels Elementary marked the seventh time that Jeremiah has walked into a new classroom, although he has cycled in and out of the same elementary school in Independence three different times.

Finally one of Ross's coworkers told her about someone he knew who was looking to rent a small house in south Kansas City. With great relief, Ross moved in and enrolled Jeremiah at Ingels.

Having a roof over her head hasn't solved all her problems. After weeks of sputtering, the transmission in Ross's car gave up entirely soon after she moved. That made it impossible to get to the job she held at the time. So now Ross takes temporary jobs through staffing agencies. She rides metro area buses to work, even as far as Kansas City International Airport.

Fortunately, a family near her home helps out with child care. Still, shortage of cash forced Ross to choose which utility would go unpaid. She picked water, and the family went without for several weeks.

Shortly before Christmas, Ross and her son arrived at Ingels Elementary for the holiday concert featuring third-and fourth-grade students, Jeremiah dapper in

a jacket and tie. Neither let on that they had walked a mile or so in the dark to get to the program.

Ross said she considers her son's school an anchor. "He knows that whatever happens, you still go to school, you have a schedule, you have to do certain things," she said. Jeremiah has always gotten good grades, but recently they've been slipping, she said. She's hoping that this summer she can get him in some programs where he can make friends.

Although she rarely has enjoyed a stable life, Ross has a wistful concept of what one would look like. She said she would like to spend more time at the school, getting to know her son's teachers and attending parent's events, but her erratic work schedule and lack of a car make it difficult.

"I really would have liked to have been with Jeremiah when they did the 'muffins with moms,'" she said.

For some Hickman Mills students, frequent tests bring language barriers into stark focus

By Barbara Shelly • Feb. 3, 2017

Second-grade teacher Aubrey Paine leads her class into the school computer lab, gets everyone seated, then moves from computer to computer, typing in login information and issuing instructions.

It is testing time at Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills School District. Besides the “benchmark” testing that goes on throughout the school year to assess whether classes are mastering necessary material, students are taking tests known as “Star assessments.” These are standardized, computer tests designed to measure a student’s progress in subjects like reading and math over the course of the school year.

After 10 minutes or so, most of Paine’s students are engaged with reading short segments and answering multiple choice questions to test their comprehension. About the only sound is the murmur of children sounding out words and sentences out loud.

Predictably, the silence doesn’t last. “I don’t know these words,” a student says plaintively, then grunts in frustration. Paine tells him to stay calm and do his best.

One of the last students to be logged in is a child who arrived in Paine’s class in the fall speaking only Spanish. She’s making progress, but English doesn’t yet come easily to her.

“It’s testing your brain,” Paine tells her. “It’s better to guess than to leave a question blank.”

To me, she says: “It kills me that she has to take this test. You can’t pass a reading test if you can’t read English.”

For most of the class, though, the Star test provides a way for Paine and her students to gauge their progress.

“I’m trying to get them to have their own goals and meet them,” Paine says. “Just telling them they have to get better doesn’t work.”



Second-grade students Dadrianna Tate (left) and Victoria Toledano are a study in concentration as they work on an assessment test at Ingels Elementary.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

A little later in the day, she is able to give her students good news. Most of them had boosted their scores from the start of the year. A few who didn’t were able to retake the test.

When all the scores are counted, Paine has 12 stu-

dents performing at or above grade level — up from just four in September. Only three students are in the “urgent intervention needed” bracket. All of them are from families where a language other than English is spoken

in the home.

Paine’s second-grade class gets a shout-out from Sabrina Winfrey, the school principal, during morning announcements. Winfrey frequently makes a big deal out of a good Star test performance. The other day she announced that a student had improved her math score by 39 points.

“It’s to encourage kids to do their best,” Winfrey says. “They like to hear their names on the intercom.”

“It kills me that she has to take this test. You can’t pass a reading test if you can’t read English.”



Testing is serious business at Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills School District, as shown by this makeshift sign on a classroom door.

BARBARA SHELLY / 89.3

After second grade, the testing stakes grow more serious. Students from third grade on this spring will take the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP) tests. Their scores will play a role in the school's annual performance report and also factor into the Hickman Mills School District's accreditation status. The district currently is provisionally accredited.

Students get lots of practice in test taking. In a fourth-grade classroom the other day, teacher Angelica Sad-

ler urged her students on as they worked on a test that involved writing out answers to 26 questions. It was an exercise in thinking and focusing that some students embraced while others fidgeted and appeared to struggle.

Complicating the testing — along with most everything else at Ingels — is that the makeup of the classes keeps shifting. The school has seen an influx of students since Thanksgiving. The staff thought the school was crowded in September, when the attendance count was 494 students. In mid-January it was up to 518.

Saddler had a girl move out of her classroom recently, but she gained two boys — one from outside of the district and one from another classroom at Ingels. Paine also acquired a child from another classroom, and a new boy from the Belton School District. She's working on assessing their skills and getting them comfortable with the classroom routine.

"Every time I think we're getting it down something changes," Paine says.

In a high-poverty elementary school characterized by student churn, everyone gets tested.

Here's what it means when we talk about student churn in Kansas City

By Barbara Shelly • Feb. 20, 2017

A parent arrives home one day to find the family's possessions sitting on the curb. Those eviction threats were all too real.

A basement fills with water and the landlord won't come around to deal with the problem. The family has no choice but to move.

An ex-boyfriend is making threats. A nearby apartment complex has a rent special going on. A family moves to be closer to a parent's new job.

For many reasons, families move over the course of the school year. For children and their schools, the consequences can be profound.

"You walk around schools and you hear people talking about this," said Leigh Anne Taylor Knight, an educator and researcher who led one of the most comprehensive studies on student mobility a couple of years ago, focusing on the Missouri side of the Kansas City metropolitan area.

Up until now, student mobility has been something of an under-the-radar factor in education policy discussions. In Missouri and Kansas, for instance, mobility rates are not factored into state accountability ratings for public schools.

But the steady comings and goings of students during a school year, especially in high-poverty districts, are increasingly a worry for educators. High student mobility — also known as churn — means extra work for teachers, less involvement on the part of parents and anxieties for students.

"A lot of schools in the metro area are really concerned about their mobility rates," said Taylor Knight.

A mobility rate can tell us a lot about a district, a school and even a classroom. To calculate rates for



For fourth-grade teacher Angelica Saddler and her colleagues at Ingels Elementary School, a high student churn rate means extra work and challenges.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

Missouri school districts and charter schools in and around Kansas City, Taylor Knight used a formula generally accepted in education policy.

The steady comings and goings of students during a school year, especially in high-poverty districts, are increasingly a worry for educators. High student mobility — also known as churn — means extra work for teachers, less involvement on the part of parents and anxieties for students.

1. Add transfers in plus transfers out.
2. Divide that number by the official start-of-the-year enrollment.

Taylor Knight's research, which was made public in August 2015, found that school district mobility rates on the Missouri side of the metropolitan area ranged from 14 percent in Grain Valley to 74 percent in the Kansas City Public Schools. (The Kansas Department of Education did not make data available.)

The second highest mobility rate on the Missouri side — 61 percent — was in the Hickman Mills School District.

From the beginning of the school year, I've been watching students come and go at an elementary school in that south Kansas City district.

According to data that Taylor Knight obtained from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Ingels Elementary had a 74.7 percent churn rate in the 2015 school year.

That number represents 198 students who transferred into the building plus 136 students who transferred out -- adding up to 334 transfers. We divide that number by the official September enrollment, which in the fall of 2015 was 447. Sure enough, my handy calculator comes up with 74.7 percent.

To narrow the lens a bit, let's look at Aubrey Paine's second-grade classroom this year.

Eighteen children arrived for the first day of school on Aug. 22. More students moved in over the first few weeks, and a few moved out, as schools and families adjusted to attendance boundaries. On the final Wednesday of September — the day of the annual attendance head count required by the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education — Paine had 22 students.

Since then four students have moved out of the classroom and seven have come in. So the mobility rate in this classroom so far is 50 percent, with three and a half months left in the school year.

Angelica Saddler's fourth grade classroom had a more consistent enrollment until Thanksgiving. Since then, four students have transferred into her class and four have transferred out. One boy joined the class right after Thanksgiving and never showed up after the

winter break. He gets counted twice in the churn rate formula — as a transfer in and a transfer out.

Saddler's official September head count was 28 students. So the mobility rate in her classroom so far is 29 percent.

Because the circumstances behind mobility vary — military communities have high churn rates, for instance — there is no agreed-upon threshold as to what constitutes an unhealthy school, or district. Educators generally say that the lower the rate, the better.

We know that every arrival in a classroom means extra work as a teacher must assess the new student's knowledge and capabilities and introduce the child to the classroom routine. We know that every departure disrupts a classroom's dynamics.

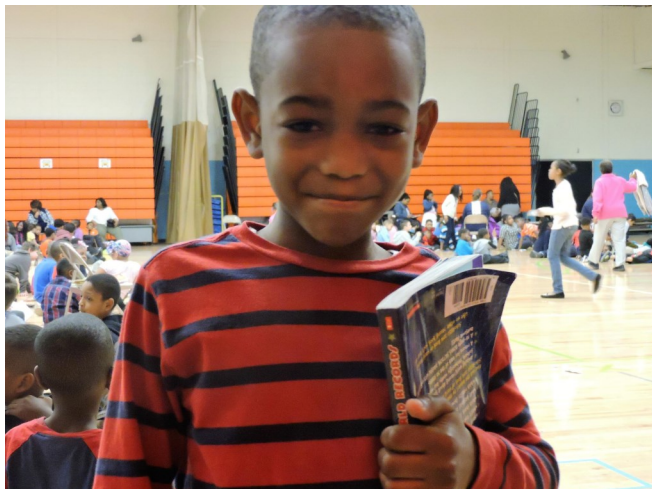
And we know that even one move in the midst of a school year can negatively impact a student's academic achievement throughout his or her school career. Taylor Knight's research found that mobile students had a harder time scoring as proficient in communication arts and math as students who stayed in the same classroom. Even one move during a school year lowered the chances of achieving proficiency by about 40 percent, her research found.

Taylor Knight's research found that a student who moves even once during the school year is only 60 percent as likely to be proficient in communication arts as a student who spent the year in the same classroom. A student who transfers is 62 percent as likely to be proficient in math as one who doesn't.

If a school's churn rate appears to be high, we can be certain the emotional and academic toll is right up there also.

Even past spring break, Hickman Mills teachers still see students leaving

By Barbara Shelly • March 19, 2017



Quincy Finley, a second-grader at Ingels Elementary School, enjoys time with his school mates as they rehearsed for a presentation during Black History Month.

BARBARA SHELLY / KCUR 89.3

Students in the Hickman Mills School District are returning from spring break this week, and their teachers are gearing up for the final stretch of the school year. In most grades, that includes high-stakes state achievement tests.

Teachers and administrators want nothing more than to settle down their classrooms and get everyone focused on the work ahead. But in this south Kansas City district, movement in and out of classrooms shows no signs of slowing down.

One morning in early March, the district's enrollment and residency coordinator, Barb Wunsch, helped several families with the admissions process.

A parent, who was re-enrolling a child in the district's preschool program, read a picture book to her daughter as Wunsch checked out her paperwork. The mother's serene manner gave no hint that she has moved multiple times in recent years, including a stay in a homeless shelter.

Another family was in Wunsch's computer from a couple of years ago. Her records showed they had moved to Chicago in 2015. Now some of the siblings were returning with their mother, while others were staying with their father in Illinois.



As the incoming superintendent of the Hickman Mills School District, Yolanda Cargile pledges to work with families.

BARBARA SHELLY / KCUR 89.3

"I can't imagine being a teacher and rotating students out and getting new ones this far into the school year," Wunsch said.

Aubrey Paine can barely imagine it either, even though that situation is her reality at the district's Ingels Elementary School. Since winter break, four new students have entered her second-grade classroom and one girl has departed.

"I just want some peace," Paine said, showing me the latest configuration of her classroom. She is endlessly rearranging her seating chart and her reading groups to accommodate changing dynamics, skill sets and personalities.

On her own time, Paine has been busy on Donors Choose, a web site that allows teachers to seek financial backing for projects or classroom supplies.

Last year she successfully appealed for a set of tablets. This year friends, family members, strangers and Kansas City's Kauffman Foundation have helped her purchase Wobble Chairs that serve as a reward for well-behaved children, a liquid motion bubbler toy to distract and calm angry children, and a monitor that sounds a siren when noise in the room reaches a cer-

tain decibel level. Paine also appealed for basic school supplies.

“As our class continues to grow more children are coming to school with few or no supplies,” she wrote in her proposal. “So my classroom supplies have slowly become non-existent.”

In Angelica Saddler’s fourth-grade class, I spoke with a girl who had just arrived. She said she missed her friends at her old school, in a community about 50 miles outside of Kansas City. “But I already have a friend here,” she said, pointing to a girl across the room. “She’s really nice.”

She may find that cultivating long-lasting friendships can be difficult in a school with a transient enrollment. Families often move with no notice and parents change phone numbers frequently, making it hard to arrange the typical play date. Student churn is trou-

blesome for educators and families, but the loneliness and stress it imposes on children is the saddest of its effects.

The Hickman Mills School District is also experiencing mobility in its top administrative ranks. Dennis Carpenter, the superintendent since 2013, is moving on to be superintendent of the larger, more affluent Lee’s Summit School District. The new Hickman Mills superintendent will be Yolanda Cargile, a Ruskin High School graduate who is currently the district’s associate superintendent of student services.

Student churn is troublesome for educators and families, but the loneliness and stress it imposes on children is the saddest of its effects.

At a reception recently, Cargile expressed gratitude for the opportunity and said she planned to move forward in partnership with the district’s families.

But that alliance, as Cargile and others in this district understand, is tenuous and ever shifting.

Why some Kansas City students have to change high schools over and over again

By Barbara Shelly • April 27, 2017

Saadiq Thompson will walk across the stage and proudly receive a diploma from Ruskin High School in Kansas City in a few weeks. But he's only spent a sliver of his student days there.

By his account, Thompson has moved nine times among eight different schools since his freshman year. His journey has zigzagged between Texas and Missouri, with a stop in New Mexico. Before that, he moved among two different middle schools, depending on whether he was living with his mother or father.

And: "Oh yeah, I did go to multiple elementary schools," he said, once he thought about it for a moment.

Thompson is 18, but his story sounds more like a narrative you'd expect from an older person. He's moved to be near family members, lived on his own, and at one point relocated to be near a former girlfriend because he thought — mistakenly, as it turned out — that he was about to become a father.

He's been at Ruskin High School in the Hickman Mills School District for four months, having started his senior year in New Mexico. Last year he attended Grandview High School for part of his junior year, having moved from a school in Texas.

Thompson's story doesn't surprise Christopher Barker, an assistant principal at Ruskin. "Kids, they're growing up too quick," he said. "They just need to slow down and be kids. The more stable they are, the more they're kids. But the more they move the quicker they grow up."

Barker sees students move in and out of Ruskin daily.

"Their lease is up. Their family has moved for whatever reason. Their landlord has decided to move the rent," he said. "This is a high rental area so a bunch of our houses turn over quickly."



Saadiq Thompson, who has moved nine times during high school, will graduate from Ruskin High School next month.

BARBARA SHELLEY / KCUR 89.3

But the high school narratives have a twist . . . Students themselves often initiate transfers. They decide they'd rather live with a different family member. They move to be with a friend. Or they leave to escape a conflict with other students.

Those are stories I've seen repeated frequently this year while reporting on the high student mobility rate in the Hickman Mills district. Classrooms in the elementary and middle schools look much different this spring than they did when school started in August. In some, more students have moved in or out than the number of students who have stayed in one place.

But the high school narratives have a twist. At the elementary and middle school levels, moves are driven by circumstances involving parents. After that, students themselves often initiate transfers. They decide they'd rather live with a different family member. They move to be with a friend. Or they leave to escape a conflict with other students.

Chris Taylor, a senior, prevailed upon his parents to let him move back to Ruskin after spending his junior year in the Blue Springs School District.



Alexander Plunkett relocated during his senior year of high school after his birth father connected with him through Facebook.

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“My parents thought (Blue Springs) was a better environment but I didn’t think it was,” he said. Taylor said he feels more comfortable with the teachers and students at Ruskin, and he was able to reclaim a spot on the basketball team — something he missed at Blue Springs.

Another senior, Alexander Plunkett, has been at Ruskin for only three months, having relocated from Wisconsin. For him, the move was a fresh start. After a childhood spent in foster care and an unhappy adoptive situation, his birth father contacted him on Facebook. Said Plunkett: “He asked me to come live with him in Kansas City and I came.”

His last school was a military academy, so the move to an urban high school took some adjustment, Plunkett said. But he’s on the track team and making friends.

“There’s a lot of very kind kids here,” he said. “Before I leave I want to make a good imprint on Ruskin.”

Moving can be hard, though. Deja Crockett, a sophomore, has already attended high schools in Leavenworth and Grandview, and her family might move again soon.

“I think we’re going back to Grandview, or maybe Blue Springs,” she said. “My mom just wants us to move. She noticed we’re really not learning much here.”

Maybe because of the moves, she holds back from investing in school and students, Crockett said. She hasn’t gotten involved in activities at Ruskin. “I keep things to myself. I try to stay to myself and not talk much to people.”

Thompson, the student who has moved nine times while in high school, has experienced a similar disconnect. “The hardest part is when you leave and you tell someone, ‘I’m leaving,’ you notice that people...well, they care, but you’re leaving. Sometimes it makes me kind of want to give up on myself.”

I ask him what has kept him in school through all of the turmoil in his young life. “My mom,” he said. “I gotta make her proud. I’m going to prom even though I won’t know too many people there because she wants to dress me up and take pictures.”

With Barker’s assistance, Thompson has enrolled in a post high school program that will enable him to learn the electrician’s trade and take additional classes. Alexander Plunkett and Chris Taylor are looking at community colleges.

Barker, who has been a teacher and administrator in the Hickman Mills district for 16 years, takes the comings and goings on his students in stride.

“I found out yesterday I was losing one of my long-time students,” he said. “I’ve known him since eighth grade. He’s a junior and I’ve worked with him extensively. Last night he walked up to me as he was walking out of school and said, ‘I’m leaving. Today’s my last day.’ His family made that decision over the weekend, to have him move to Texas.”

But Barker knows that, for every student who departs, someone will enroll. And sooner or later all new students find their way to Barker’s noisy office, by the cafeteria. “Most of the time my door is open and kids just come in and out,” he said.

The very same thing can be said of his high school.

At year's end, Hickman Mills students lament missed students and missed opportunities

By Barbara Shelly • May 23, 2017

The tipping point may have come in late January, when yet another quick-tempered boy moved into Aubrey Paine's second grade classroom at Ingels Elementary School.

Or maybe it was the departure in early February of the bright, motivated little girl who had been the leader of a reading circle.

As winter gave way to spring, the changes in the student roster came so fast I barely recognized the happy classroom I'd first walked into in September.

Paine scarcely recognized it either. Somewhere along the line her job had morphed into one that involved as much crowd control as teaching.

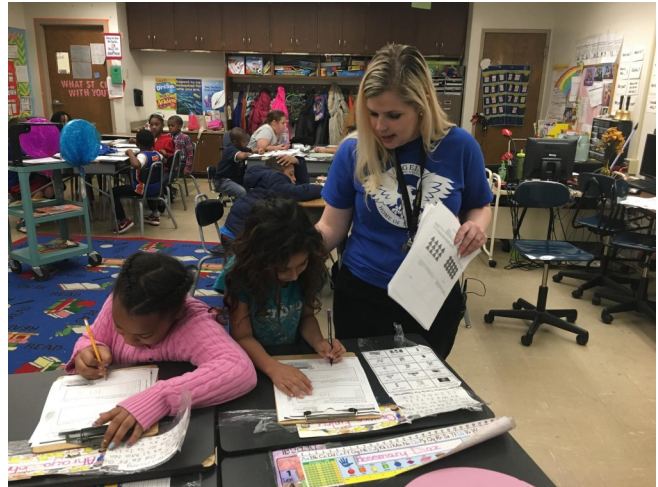
"We started out pretty small and didn't have a lot of behavior problems," she tells me as the school year nears its close. "We received a lot of compliments about our class. We were all super, super close and building a community. We still work on that now, but it's a little more difficult. We have 26 students now, I believe?"

In this classroom and others where children regularly come and go like a non-stop game of musical chairs, hard work simply can't overcome the instability. Teachers and administrators can only bemoan lost opportunities and search for solutions for next year.

A year in the life

I visited Paine's classroom at Ingels Elementary nearly every week during the 2016-17 school year to see first-hand how student mobility impacts teachers, children and families. Classroom churn is rampant in the Kansas City area, especially in districts serving low-income families. And yet the stories of the havoc it wreaks have gone mostly untold.

Ingels is one of eight elementary schools in the Hickman Mills School District in south Kansas City. Most



Second grade teacher Aubrey Paine helps students Ahriya and Rosemary with an assignment.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

of its families are poor. One hundred percent of Hickman Mills students qualify for free lunch.

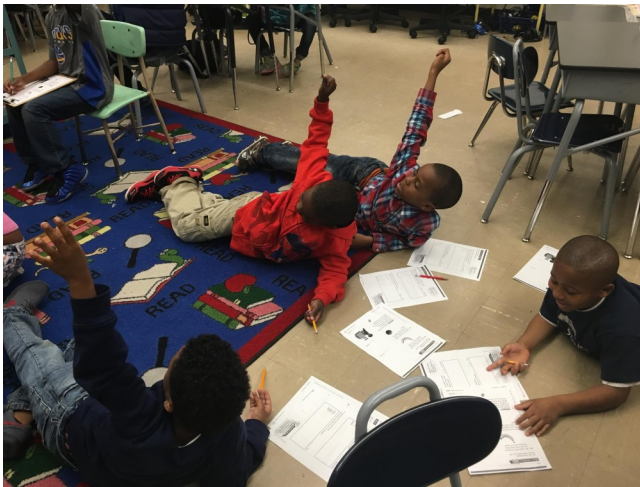
Ingels' boundaries encompass several sprawling apartment complexes, a couple of motels serving transient families, and blocks of low-slung houses owned by out-of-town investors. Built in 1966, the single-level elementary school is bursting at the seams. Nearly 200 new students poured in at the start of the school year as the result of district boundary changes. About 200 additional students have come

in or out since then. The school will end the year with more than 500 students.

"It's been a transitional year," says Sabrina Tillman Winfrey, the principal. "Just kids coming and going and trying to get everybody on the same page, including the parents. That's kind of difficult sometimes."

Even if every student would stay put, this school faces multiple challenges. Many of its students are two or three grade levels behind in reading and math. Teachers spend a lot of time dealing with attendance and

In this classroom and others where children regularly come and go like a nonstop game of musical chairs, hard work simply can't overcome the instability.



Boys in Aubrey Paine's class raise their hands.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

behavior issues. Winfrey struggles to convince parents they need to get their children to school on time and prepared to learn.

This is Paine's second year at Ingels and her fourth as a teacher. She moved from the calmer environs of Baldwin City, Kansas, driven by a sense of mission. "I felt appreciated there but I wasn't needed as much," she says.

By many measures, Paine has had a successful year. Many of her second graders have made solid gains in reading and math. She was one of three finalists for district teacher of the year.

But as the year has worn on, I've watched Paine become increasingly frustrated. She believes in building community among her students and maintaining routines. But that's hard when the classroom dynamics keep changing.

Since the first day of school, 13 new students have entered Paine's class and five have departed. Those numbers include a couple of students who came in and then left.

At least half a dozen of the new arrivals are young boys prone to meltdowns and fisticuffs. After a point it became impossible to separate everyone who might cause a problem. Scuffles became a regular occurrence.

Paine now counts herself fortunate when she works through her lesson plans. She worries about keeping her students on track with the all-important benchmark scores in reading and math. Fun activities such as "brain break," when students get to dance to a video, happen infrequently.

A wake-up call

While the turnover in Paine's classroom is high, it is not unique or even unusual in the Kansas City area, says researcher Leigh Anne Taylor Knight.

"Superintendents, counselors, teachers, principals all talk about this churning of students in and out of classrooms, in and out of schools, and how difficult it is to keep your eyes on the performance of individual students when you aren't sure how long they were going to be with you and how long you are going to be able to serve them," Taylor Knight says.

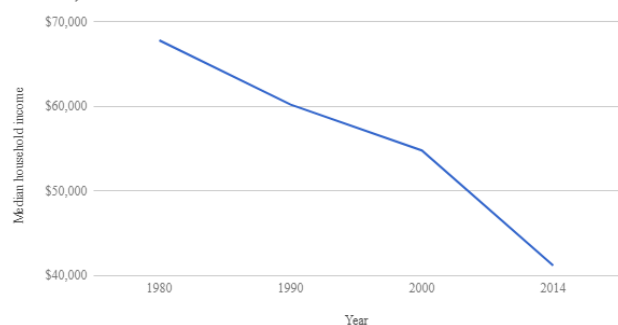
In 2015, the Kansas City Area Education Research Foundation released a groundbreaking study on student mobility on the Missouri side of the Kansas City metro.

Taylor Knight found that one in five students moves at least once during the school year, and those students have poorer attendance and lower achievement rates than students who don't move. Mobility is most severe in the Kansas City Public Schools, certain charter schools, and districts closest to Kansas City's core, like Hickman Mills.

Taylor Knight's research served as a wake-up call to educators and leaders around Kansas City. They gathered for a "mobility summit" and discussed measures such as sharing utility bills and other data required for enrollment to lessen the time that children are out of school between moves.

But families – especially those who are poor – remain in motion.

Median household income in Hickman Mills School District (adjusted for inflation)



A transient childhood

Over winter break this year, I met Sharonda Hooker Dennis, a parent with a son at Truman Elementary, another Hickman Mills school. She experienced a



Sharonda Hooker Dennis says her son has been in four schools in five years.

BARBARA SHELLY / KCUR 89.3

transient childhood herself, and shared her regret that her son was in his fourth school in five years.

"I went to four different high schools," she says. "I don't know how many middle schools or elementary schools. I had reading problems. I kept an F in math because everybody teaches different."

Hooker Dennis overcame her troubled school career to get a steady job as a dental technician. But her training at a for-profit career college left her with crippling student loans and garnished paychecks. As her financial problems mounted, she was evicted from her apartment.

"We ended up having to sleep in my car, some nights in my sister's house, some nights at a friend's house," she says.

Although she now lives in a rented house in south Kansas City, the move to Truman isn't working out well, Hooker Dennis says. Her son was struggling academically before he got there, and she finds his class too large and raucous.

"With the Hickman Mills school district, it's hard, because they don't have the time to sit down with each student and give them the attention that they need," she says. She's thinking about moving again to try to find a better fit for her son.

At schools like Truman and Ingels, the near-constant student churn makes it hard to devise effective strategies to solve problems. And mobility creates its own set of problems.

Falling behind

I also made frequent visits this year to Angelica Saddler's fourth grade classroom at Ingels. Saddler, too, has had her hands full with an unruly classroom that

has burgeoned to 30 students, many of them a couple of grades behind academically.

"They started off kind of low and I haven't seen the progress I'd like to see," Saddler says.

Saddler herself missed the first few weeks of the school year; she was at home with a newborn daughter. Since she's arrived, about a dozen students have come in and out of her classroom.

"Many times I'm not aware that they are joining my class until that morning, and so I'm just trying to make sure that they have a desk and supplies," Saddler said.

Like many other area districts, Hickman Mills is pushing to have its students become fluent on iPads and computers, in part because state assessment tests must be taken online. But that gets complicated when new students join the class.



Angelica Saddler is a fourth grade teacher at Ingels.

ELLE MOXLEY / 89.3

"We do a lot of work on iPads and they're not always in the system yet and able to jump right into the work that we're doing," Saddler said. "I always have to go back and add them to things that I've created for the class and get passwords and user names set up."

All of that takes time that Saddler should be spending on instruction.

"It gets really hard," said Winfrey, the principal. "I'm constantly trying to build morale because there are certain points where, you know, teachers are on that edge. They want to do their best for kids but they're always starting over."

Teacher exodus

Many of Ingels' teachers were new this year, and several teachers have told me they aren't sure they'll return next year. Mobility and the pressures of trying to raise the academic performance of disadvantaged children have taken their toll. A common complaint is that the school lacks effective methods for dealing with students who disrupt classrooms and learning.

Paine doesn't plan to leave. But she has regrets about this school year. She wanted to take her class on a field trip to the zoo but opted against it as she struggled to get her students settled down. One of her girls still carries a few dollars to school in her backpack, just in case the trip materializes.

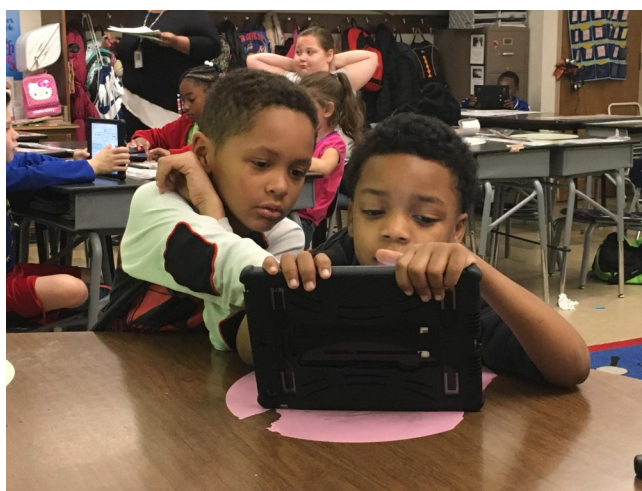
While many of her students are doing well, Paine wishes she had more time for others.

"I still haven't gotten all my kids up to speed because of how fast they come in and out," she says. "You can only do the best you can. There's no answer that says I get all of them caught up all the time."

The last few changes in Paine's classroom were especially wrenching.

In early April, she lost one of the students who had been with her since the beginning. The girl simply didn't show up on a Monday morning. An attendance clerk made calls and learned the family had moved to a different school district over the weekend. No one had bothered to notify the school.

Her spot was quickly taken by a boy from a different district. He turned out to have some learning issues that should have been communicated to Ingels but weren't.



Isaiah, left, and Dominic, two second graders in Aubrey Paine's class, work on iPads at the start of the school day.

ELLE MOXLEY / 89.3

Then, with a month to go in the school year, another student went missing. School officials looked for him and finally heard from a grandparent, who said the

boy's mother had wanted him to come live with her in Kansas City.

But one morning the boy showed up in Paine's classroom. Confused, she escorted him to the office. The grandparent explained that the mother had never enrolled him in a new school, and could he return to Ingels? But he no longer had legal residency in Hickman Mills, so the answer was no.

In early April, she lost one of the students who had been with her since the beginning. The girl simply didn't show up on a Monday morning. An attendance clerk made calls and learned the family had moved to a different school district over the weekend. No one had bothered to notify the school.

"What have you been doing all these weeks?" a counselor asked the child.

He shrugged. "Just sitting around watching the world go by," he said.

Paine turned away in tears.

Elsewhere in Kansas City, community investment brings stability to schools

By Elle Moxley • May 23, 2017



Brenda Thomas is president of the Marlborough Community Coalition, a neighborhood organization that's been cleaning up vacant lots and abandoned houses.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

Brenda Thomas and her husband bought their house in Marlborough in the 1990s because they wanted to send their daughter to a magnet program in Kansas City Public Schools.

"We're a well-kept secret," Thomas says matter-of-factly. "We're south town, but not all the way to 95th Street or Bannister. We have quite a few historic homes here in our area."

But after Thomas' daughter graduated from high school, the neighborhood began to change. As older homeowners died, investors bought the properties – and renters moved in.

"There are a lot of families who are — for lack of a better word — transient," says Thomas. "Sometimes those families move from one rental house to another because the conditions weren't very good in one."

Crime increased. Sometimes, Thomas would hear gunshots and screeching car tires on her block.

"I've heard people say well, you know, you get used to that. No you don't. No you don't, and you don't have to settle for that," Thomas says.

What's happening in Marlborough is the same thing that's happening five miles south in the Hickman Mills School District. Here's the difference: homeowners are driving the slumlords out of Marlborough.

They're rehabilitating rundown houses and making the neighborhood a nice place to live again.

That's had a stabilizing effect on schools.

Stabilizing neighborhoods

The Marlborough Community Coalition comprises five neighborhoods from Gregory to about 87th Street, from Troost over to Prospect. It straddles the boundary between the Center School District and Kansas City Public Schools.

Thomas, who is president of the coalition, says she wasn't going to be run out of her own neighborhood. She still had a mortgage to pay and a daughter to put through college.

"It takes a lot of research because you'll have people who are registered here but they're not actually the owners," Thomas says. "They'll refer you to a company that may be in Australia or New Zealand, all kinds of crazy places way out of the way."

But if they can figure out who owns a property, there's actually a chance they might be able to do something about it. The Marlborough Community Coalition has gotten the Land Bank to turn over several houses it owned for rehabilitation.

Two years ago, Marlborough got more than a quarter million dollars to tackle blight in the neighborhood.



Two years ago, Marlborough got more than a quarter million dollars to tackle blight in the neighborhood.

LAURA ZIEGLER / KCUR 89.3

“What we’re trying to do through our housing committee is to rehabilitate as many houses as we can within a model block area and then offer that as a resource for the Center School District,” Thomas says.

The Community Coalition lets the district know which houses have been rehabilitated by responsible landlords, and Center passes that information on to parents. According to U.S. Census data, 68.8 percent of homes in Missouri are owner-occupied. Today, Marlborough is about 51 percent owners and 49 percent renters.

“The 51 percent,” says Thomas, “is what we’re trying to increase.”

Stabilizing families

But often parents don’t have a choice when they move.

“Sadly, one of the last things a family has the luxury of considering is whether this housing is in my child’s school’s attendance area,” says Jim MacDonald with the United Way of Greater Kansas City.

MacDonald oversees the Family Stability Initiative, a program serving families in the Kansas City and Independence school districts.



A dumpster sits outside a house in Hickman Mills. Low-income families sometimes move so suddenly they're forced to leave their possessions behind.

BARBARA SHELLY / KCUR 89.3

“We take referrals exclusively from the school districts, classroom-level staff or school counselors, social workers who identify families that are struggling with school attendance,” he says.

Attendance is often directly related to financial stability – or, rather, housing instability.

Low-income families can’t always afford quality housing, so they settle for substandard housing. Family Stability Initiative case managers can offer really individualized solutions. If a mom’s spending a lot on takeout, it might be because the kitchen in her rented apartment is infested with bugs. Short-term financial assistance pays for an exterminator and to buy a new fridge.

“This is one small intervention that helps one family at a time,” MacDonald says.

“Sadly, one of the last things a family has the luxury of considering is whether this housing is in my child’s school’s attendance area.”

There’s enough money to serve 400 families over five years. But this is a city with thousands of highly mobile families. MacDonald says it’s going to take a system-level approach.

“One idea that came up was what if the school districts had access to the utility company database in the same way that many social service agencies have access to it?” MacDonald says.

That would allow schools to check residency in real-time, possibly cutting the number of days kids miss when their families move.

That would allow schools to check residency in real-time, possibly cutting the number of days kids miss when their families move.

Stabilizing schools

Other districts are implementing systems of their own.

“We’re very conscientious of the fact that we do have student mobility and turnover in our student population,” says Leah Copeland, principal at Winnwood Elementary in North Kansas City. “Teachers are very proactive ... because we know it’s going to happen, so we might as well plan and prepare for it.”

Winnwood has a mobility rate between 40 and 59 percent. Every new student meets with the school counselor and the community resource specialist.

“One thing we do here that really works well for our students is we have a new student orientation group



Ingels Elementary in the Hickman Mills School District has held events throughout the year like this Halloween trunk or treat in October, but they're usually sparsely attended.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

to become acclimated to our school culture and how things work at Winnwood,” Copeland says.

If for whatever reason a student has to leave Winnwood, a teacher will usually reach out to the receiving school and offer to share interventions – or the Individualized Education Program, if the child has one. But most of the time, Copeland says, families don’t want to leave.

“I’ve had multiple families come and say, ‘I don’t want my child to leave Winnwood, so we’re going to look at moving to a different apartment complex in your attendance area,’” Copeland says. “That is 100 percent based on their child having a good educational experience.”

Here's how Hickman Mills became a forgotten community

By Barbara Shelly & Elle Moxley • May 23, 2017



In January, Barb Wunsch had to explain to a ninth grader who'd left the district in the fall why she couldn't get her old schedule back.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

Starting in the 1990s, Hickman Mills became a forgotten community. Middle-income families moved out. Blight moved in. Drive through the neighborhoods today and the symbols of disinvestment are everywhere – gutters falling off houses, trash in yards, payday loan shops where stores used to be.

“It’s just strictly rental there now and nobody takes care of the yards. Nobody trims the trees. Nobody looks out for the other person,” says Jerry Porterfield, a longtime landlord in the area.

Porterfield mostly rents Section 8 properties, which low-income families get a federal subsidy to rent. Though he has a reputation as a good property owner – quick to make repairs and fair with tenants – he’s been selling off his houses in south Kansas City neighborhoods like Ruskin.

“I wish I didn’t have anything there now,” he says.

Others, though, see opportunity in the low-slung houses – but too often of the wrong kind. Out-of-town investors purchase properties by the bundle.

“They can buy ’em and just flip ’em, basically,” says Barb Wunsch, coordinator of enrollment and residency for the Hickman Mills School District. “We have a lot of property management companies out here. Some of them are from out of state, and it’s very difficult to get them to do anything for our families.”

Wunsch understands better than almost anyone what three decades of disinvestment have meant for this community. She has lived through it, refusing to leave her home as neighbors packed up and moved. And she deals with it daily as families move their children in and out of Hickman Mills classrooms, no more rooted to their schools than they are to their neighborhoods.

That disinvestment is precisely why mobility is so devastating to a school district. People don’t care as much when they don’t think they’ll be sticking around.

Living in rentals

With an enrollment of about 6,400 students, the school district remains the only source of identity for a once-autonomous community. After the small city of Hickman Mills was annexed by Kansas City in 1961, residents resisted becoming part of the district that’s today known as Kansas City Public Schools. In fact, many families moved to Hickman Mills because it was seen as better and safer than the urban school system.

But now, in a community of concentrated poverty, the Hickman Mills School District deals with a set of problems that families from Kansas City’s core once moved south to escape.

Forty-five percent of the occupied housing stock within its boundaries is rental, according to information compiled by the Kansas City Planning and Development Department. Almost 13 percent of the housing is vacant. And because many homeowners are older or

Disinvestment is precisely why mobility is so devastating to a school district. People don’t care as much when they don’t think they’ll be sticking around.



Trash and broken furniture litter the curb in a neighborhood in the Hickman Mills School District.

BARBARA SHELLY / KCUR 89.3

have sought other school options, most of the children who attend Hickman Mills schools live in rental properties.

That leads to a state of flux that plays out continuously in Wunsch's office.

One morning a mother came to report a change of address and see if her children needed to change schools. Shaunte McElroy had moved to a place in Hickman Mills in the summer and thought she had found her dream house – a place big enough for her and four children.

Then it rained. The basement flooded. Mold appeared. And the landlord never showed up.

So four months later, with the school year well underway, McElroy moved. She considered herself fortunate when Wunsch told her only one of her kids needed to change schools.

Landlords have their horror stories, too, and Wunsch has heard them all. She knows that tenants jump from one rent special to another, sometimes putting utility bills in the names of their children if the parent is behind on payments. She knows about trashed rooms and busted sinks.

"Some of these parents show up, and this is the fourth school they've been in this year," Wunsch says. "I see frontline what this transitory nature does."

Who's buying?

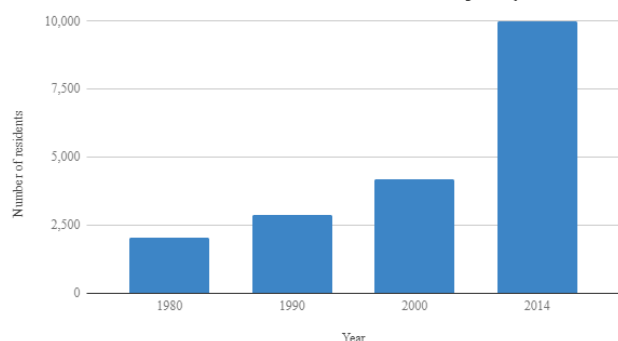
Hickman Mills over the years has borne the brunt of some ruinous housing policies. Under pressure to locate Section 8 housing units outside of the Kansas City Public Schools boundaries, the Housing Authori-

ty of Greater Kansas City began locating units there in the late 1980s. Nearby property values dropped, and owners sold to investors, some of whom themselves got into the Section 8 program.

But Section 8, which is coveted by low-income tenants, is actually more stable than some other rental housing.

In 2007 and 2008, Hickman Mills neighborhoods were clobbered by the foreclosure crisis. For years brokers had sold homes to families for inflated prices at adjustable-rate and sometimes interest-only mortgages. When interest rates went up, housing values didn't. Unable to keep up with their mortgages or sell their homes, buyers abandoned properties in droves. Investors swooped in. It's possible today to purchase a home for not much more than \$20,000, throw on a fresh coat of paint and rent the property for \$800 or more a month.

Residents of Hickman Mills School District under the federal poverty level



Sandy Sexton, office manager of the Ruskin Heights Homes Association, says about 200 of the 1,800 properties she keeps track of changed hands in a recent 12-month period. And that tally doesn't include moves by tenants.

"I know that the schoolchildren are moving in and out like crazy," she says. "I can't imagine what that's like for the teacher."

Not all of the changes are negative. Sparked by the massive Cerner office park development at the site of the old Bannister Mall, some investors are purchasing homes in Ruskin with the aim of improving their value.

"I know some rehabbing landlords who are excellent," Sexton says. "I know others who you feel like are just sucking the value out of the property."

People look to Cerner as the great hope for bringing change to the Hickman Mills area, although no one seems quite sure how that will work.



Yohana Gomez, left, and her stepdad, Rogelio Romo, fill out forms in Barb Wunsch's office. Gomez started the year in Hickman Mills, moved to Kansas City, Kansas, to live with a relative, before returning to the district.

ELLE MOXLEY

"I have 20 homes in the area. I'm just very hopeful that when Cerner comes in they'll bring much needed money and energy and people that can have an impact," says Larry Hedenkamp, who renovates properties and either rents them out or sells them to investors.

But right now the provisionally accredited Hickman Mills School District is both the victim of a dysfunctional housing milieu and a contributor to it.

"That's the first question buyers ask," Hedenkamp says, referring to the schools. "I say they're tough, not the best, but the investors don't care. They hope they're good but that's not the main thing they're looking for."

Seeking stability

Cerner workers will care, however. The middle-income homebuyers so coveted in south Kansas City want quality schools. If Hickman Mills neighborhoods are to stabilize, the school district will have to get better.

Dennis Carpenter, the outgoing superintendent, knows this.

"There's nobody out there waiting to come save us in a place like Hickman Mills," he says. "Our families don't have the means. So these problems that we've

had, our best opportunities to solve them are related to us rolling up our sleeves and getting them solved amongst ourselves."

Carpenter, who is taking the top job in the Lee's Summit School District in July, acknowledged that solving problems is difficult in an underfinanced school district with an impoverished, transient enrollment. Milestones he's achieved in Hickman Mills, such as universal preschool, are difficult to sustain when children and families keep moving in and out of the schools.

Still, Carpenter says, you have to keep trying.

"It maybe makes it look like three steps forward and two steps back and then three again and you lose two but you still netted a positive two. The alternative is not to do it and get no improvement," he says.

Back in the district's enrollment office, Wunsch also hopes the opening of the Cerner campus will spark a return of the middle class to Hickman Mills.

"I've been here 40 years this year," she says. "I bought my house in 1977. Now, my kids would like me to go somewhere. But you know what? This is my home. I'm going to be here until it falls down around me."

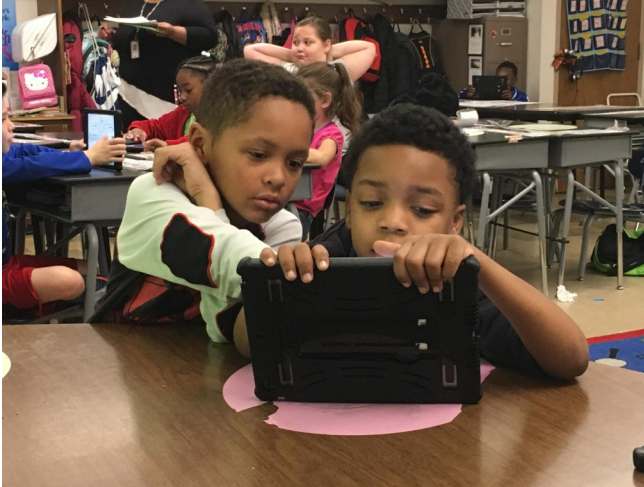


Even though he's leaving for Lee's Summit at the end of the school year, superintendent Dennis Carpenter has continued to advocate loudly for Hickman Mills. Here he is in February, attending a meeting to oppose opening a charter school in the district.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

In Kansas City school accustomed to loss, fatal shooting of 9-year-old causes anguish

By Barbara Shelly & Elle Moxley • Jan. 23, 2018



Dominic Young Jr., right, plays an educational game on an iPad with his best friend from second grade, Isaiah Rogers.
ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

Children at Ingels Elementary School in the Hickman Mills School District are used to seeing empty desks.

Ingels is a “high churn” school, meaning students transfer in and out frequently during the school year. Often they depart with no notice, leaving their supplies behind and the school staff scrambling to determine their whereabouts.

But the empty desk in Angelica Saddler’s third-grade classroom this week is different.

Its occupant, Dominic Young Jr., should be practicing his math, working on his reading and interacting with classmates in his mischievous way. Instead, the school is reeling from news that 9-year-old Dominic was killed in a drive-by shooting over the weekend.

Initial reports from police said the child was riding in a car driven by his father near Emanuel Cleaver II Boulevard and U.S. 71 when he was struck by a bullet, possibly intended for another vehicle. The father told police he did not immediately realize his son had been shot, and continued driving to his home in Grandview. He notified police when he found his son’s body limp and unresponsive. Dominic was pro-

nounced dead at a hospital. Kansas City police are asking anyone with information about the shooting to call the Homicide Unit or the TIPS Hotline at 816-474-8477.

KCUR profiled Ingels Elementary School last year as part of its “Musical Chairs” project exploring the issue of student mobility. We got to know Dominic from regular visits to his second-grade classroom.

He transferred into Ingels a few weeks into the school year from another school in the Hickman Mills district. At first he used his “new kid” status to vent his frustration when work seemed hard. “I don’t know my numbers yet ‘cause I’m kind of new,” he said plaintively, while struggling with a math problem.

But Dominic quickly grew to regard his classmates and his teacher, Aubrey Paine, as his school family. In November, he told KCUR he enjoyed math “because it’s easy.” He enthused about football and said his favorite position was “linerback.” And he said he enjoyed “brain breaks,” interludes during which he and his classmates got to dance to videos.

“He loved to read,” Paine says. “He had such a fascination with Martin Luther King.”

Dominic combed the classroom and school library for books about the civil rights hero, she remembers. As the end of the school year approached,

Paine loaded him up with a summer’s worth of reading material on King.

By the end of second grade, Dominic was testing close to the fifth grade level in reading and math, Paine says.

“He was very, very smart,” she says. “He loved to dance. He loved to draw. He loved hanging out with his family.”

Dominic had a best friend in second grade, a boy named Isaiah Rogers. They shared a mutual love of football and eagerly sought out sports books during reading times. The two boys socialized outside of

“He was very, very smart . . . He loved to dance. He loved to draw. He loved hanging out with his family.”

school on weekends and holidays, a happy friendship that was somewhat unusual in a school with an enrollment as transient as Ingels'. Isaiah moved out of the district over the summer – a loss, but something the school's staff is accustomed to. The death of a student by homicide is something else.

The school district sent counselors to Ingels Elementary Monday morning, as students were beginning to hear reports that something terrible had happened to a classmate over the weekend. Two counselors spent much of the day in Saddler's third-grade classroom, where Dominic's writing on the dry-erase board and notebooks strewn in his desk served as a reminder of the loss.

Paine posted a photo that includes Dominic as her profile picture on Facebook. On social media, other teachers and staff at Ingels asked for prayers and vowed to get through the crisis "as the family we are."

A family, like Dominic's own, that now must find a way to mend a broken heart.



Reporter Barbara Shelly talks to Dominic and his friend Isaiah. The two met in second grade and spent time together outside of school until Isaiah's family moved away.

ELLE MOXLEY / KCUR 89.3

Where are they now?

In the second half of the 2017-2018 school year, KCUR 89.3 checked in on some of the people we got to know while watching students move in and out of Ingels Elementary School the year before.

Aubrey Paine, who was honored as the Hickman Mills School District's 2017 Teacher of the Year, was still in her second-grade classroom, resolutely pushing her young students to achieve in reading and math. Her room was less crowded than a year ago. Paine had 21 students when we checked in — about six fewer than the same time last year.

Fewer children have been moving in and out, Paine said, although three new students arrived on the same day in late January. Teaching in a high-poverty school district is never going to be easy, but Paine said the smaller class size and more stable enrollment were helping her and her students reach their goals.

Angelica Saddler, the fourth-grade teacher featured in our series, took an assignment in a third-grade classroom at Ingels. It's been a good fit, she reported. And it helps that her enrollment has also been more stable.

"I have had only had one student leave and one join our class after winter break," Saddler said. "It's made it easier to establish procedures and build classroom community. We have been able to do more projects and try new things. I have a good group of kids."

In early March, Saddler got word that she'd been chosen as Ingels Elementary's Teacher of the Year for 2018.

Marcia Pitts, the Hickman Mills School District's teaching legend, still hadn't figured out how to leave her chosen profession. Although she officially retired three years ago, she was back at Ingels this school year as a long-term substitute in a sixth-grade classroom.

Pitts, a teacher for more than four decades, has been on the job so long she remembers teaching the mother of one of her current sixth-graders. And she's been at Ingels long enough to point out that only about 25 of the 70 students currently in the three sixth-grade classrooms attended the school from first grade on.

But after this year, Pitts said, she's moving on too. "This really is my last year," she said. "I think it's time for me to travel. It's time for me to do what I set out to do when I first retired."

Barb Wunsch was also still on the job. As the Hickman Mills School District's residency and enrollment coordinator, Wunsch had her hands full in the 2017-18 school year with a temporary move to a new building and the district's adoption of an on-line enrollment process.

"I always, say, 'I'm the district's hot potato,'" Wunsch said. "I do what I do. We're about getting kids in school and I will do what I can to get that done."

Kaily Ross, the mom who had struggled to find housing after an eviction, relocated her elementary-age son, Jeremiah, for what she hopes is the last time. Now with a steady job and a car, Ross moved to Independence. Her son, a fourth-grader who has changed schools eight times, is thriving in an elementary school that is less chaotic than Ingels, and offers more sports and extracurricular activities.

Shari Anderson, the grandmother who was a mainstay at Ingels Elementary parent events last year, also moved her grandchildren once more. They live in the Leavenworth area now, marking four schools in three years for Anderson's elementary-age grandchildren.

Dennis Carpenter, the superintendent who passionately argued that Missouri's accountability system for schools was biased against high-poverty districts like Hickman Mills, took a new job over the summer. He now is superintendent of the affluent Lee's Summit School District. One of his deputies, **Yolanda Cargile**, took over the superintendent's job in Hickman Mills.

Missouri's latest performance report, released in November 2017, found that scores in Hickman Mills had slipped a bit since the previous year, though the district remains provisionally accredited. Cargile promised a sustained focus on raising achievement. And in her classrooms, students continued moving in and out.

About this project

For the full 2016-17 academic year, KCUR contributor Barbara Shelly immersed herself in second- and fourth-grade classrooms in the Hickman Mills School District to learn firsthand how “churn” affects students and their education. The frequency with which students change schools during the academic year is a significant but under-the-radar aspect of education. Working with KCUR reporter Elle Moxley, Shelly explored the challenges that arise from all that moving around — many of which involve the broader community.



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