EDUCATOR BRIEF

WHERE, WHEN, AND WHAT HAPPENS AFTER STUDENTS TRANSFER BEFORE YEAR-END?

Highlighting Findings on Student Mobility in St. Louis Schools

Brief on original analysis conducted by Jason Jabbari, PhD; Takeshi Terada, PhD; Yung Chun, PhD; Richard Hall, PhD. Qualititative Analysis by Amber Jones, PhD and Andrew Butler, PhD. Brief written by Saras Chung, PhD, and Ryan Delaney.

St. Louis students are transferring across the region and experiences vary — with some experiencing better academic outcomes and others increased likelihood of academic decline.

The rate of student mobility is high in St. Louis City compared to surrounding counties and similar cities across the state (see our first brief for more). Educators told the St. Louis Research-Practice Collaborative that uncovering the reasons why students leave, when they are most likely to transfer, and where they're going can help them serve students better.

This brief provides an accessible overview of rigorous quantitative and qualitative analyses. We take perspectives from teachers and pair it with the insights gained from data to illuminate how student transfers are happening and what we are learning about after it happens.

We outline where students are going, when they leave, and outcomes as a result of transferring. We also discuss parent and teacher perspectives on student mobility and provide recommendations for interventions generated by educators in St. Louis City.

TRANSFERRING IN ST. LOUIS' CONTEXT

St. Louis is well-documented for its racial and economic challenges. Examining student transfer in context is key to gaining insights on where interventions could support students in the long run. In work that is presented in this brief, we will demonstrate the interplay between these dynamics and how it affects students over time.

What's a "student transfer?"

This study defines a student transfer as a transfer record of a student moving from one school to another at any point during an academic year from Kindergarten to 12th grade. For these analyses, we do NOT include students who transfer during the summer.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Students move all over the St. Louis metropolitan region — not only within the city boundaries.
- Transfer patterns follow historical racial segregation patterns in St. Louis.
- By third grade, a little less than 60% of students who are performing below-basic will transfer schools at some point during their K-12 educational career.
- Not all transfers had a negative impact. Students who moved to high-performing schools initially are set back academically but catch up with students in their new school by the second year. This is not true for students moving to lower proficiency schools.
- Educators coined the term "invisible mobility" as a challenge masked by traditional student mobility rates: rapid transfer in and out when shopping for schools, chronic absenteeism, and transferring related to housing insecurity, though not formally designated.

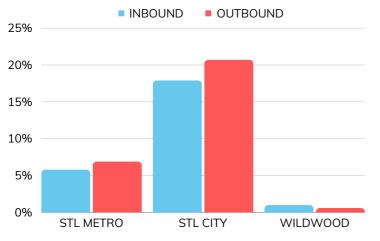**A Note on Student Mobility Rates between DESE publicly-available data and DESE student-level data**

Brief 1 demonstrated publicly available student mobility rates as high as 38% on average across St. Louis City schools. Student-level data, however, showed that only about 9% of St. Louis City students are transferring before school year's end. The discrepancy was cross-checked between WashU and SLU PRiME researchers with school-level data. They found the inflation was a result of summer transfers included in student mobility rates and the same student transferring in and out of the same school (perhaps not even leaving but being chronically absent). The difference between the rate (school churn) and percent of students who transfer is important to distinguish. We discuss the second issue at the end of this brief alongside other insights from St. Louis educators.

ACCESS RAW RESULTS

WHERE ARE STUDENTS MOVING?

To focus only on movement patterns within the city may be near-sighted. Though there are certainly moves between district, charter, parochial and private schools in the city limits, there is a larger story at play — many students in St. Louis transfer across the metropolitan region. With over 60 public school districts (some with multiple schools at each level), there are many options for students if their families choose to or need to transfer. This does not confirm the perception that St. Louis students are moving only between city schools.

Percent of Inbound and Outbound Transfers by ZIP Code

The percent of students transferring out of less affluent areas was roughly 14% higher than percentages moving out of the general area.

- For the entire St. Louis City and County, before the pandemic (2018-2019 school year), a total of 10,612 students (6.9%) transferred out of their own ZIP code area (outbound), while 10,218 students (5.8 percent) transferred into a different ZIP code area (inbound).
- Comparably, in city ZIP code 63106, which includes the Jeff-Vander-Lou, Carr Square, Old North, and Columbus Square neighborhoods, where median household income is $22,263: 20.7% of students transferred out, and 17.9% transferred into the area in the same school year.
- For reference, the suburb of Wildwood (ZIP code 63005) with a median household income of $183,260, the student mobility rates were significantly lower. Only 0.6% of students transferred out, and 1.0% transferred into the area during the 2018-19 school year.
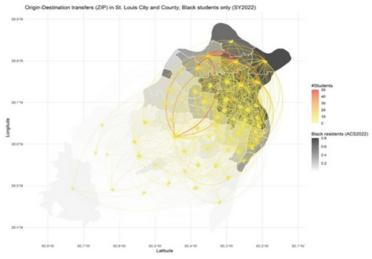
The Impact of COVID-19 on Transfer by Race

COVID-19 pandemic shutdowns had a starkly different effect on student transfers by race. The number of Black students transferring was reduced by half in two years (from 5,157 in SY2020 to 2,609 in SY2022). This trend contrasts with white students, whose migration volume changed minimally (from 1,436 to 1,135).
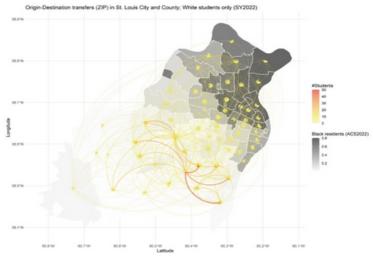
TRANSFERS BY RACE AND REGION

In the 2019 school year, 5,157 Black students transferred to a school outside of their original neighborhoods. This is almost four times the movement of White students' transfers (1,436) in the same period. In the 2022 school year, most of the transfer exchanges of Black students occurred between the City and North County areas. We also observe smaller volumes of transfers in the west, south, and central county areas. The west-county zip code with most movement for Black students includes Kirkwood, Parkway, and Ladue school districts moving into and out of North County.

There were also transfer patterns in student transfer between northeast neighborhoods, which were mostly Black and lower income, and southwest neighborhoods, which are mostly White and higher income.

Black Student Transfers 2022

White Student Transfers 2022

Despite the muted rates of mobility that students experienced during the pandemic, numbers are returning back to pre-pandemic levels. Likely, pandemic housing policies created some stability for students. Perhaps decreased incidents of disciplinary events also helped. Educators should consider what exactly students are experiencing in their specific schools as rates resume.

WHEN ARE STUDENTS MOST LIKELY TO TRANSFER IN K-12 AND WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM OVER TIME?

Why examine when students transfer?

SRPC educators noted that learning when students are most likely to transfer could help them target programming or identify ways to support student stability in schools. This section examined the probability of transferring based on academic indicators and discipline. There are likely other factors that we did not have data to measure, such as teacher-student rapport or number of friends in a school, that may be relevant to explore. For full results, see the raw analysis via stlrpc.org.

Most families expect that their school experiences will lead to some level of stability for their family and children. Few enroll in a school hoping to transfer their children before a natural transition point. However, when an abrupt transfer happens, it has impact. Learning which factors are within or outside of a school's control can be useful for intervention design. These analyses do not suggest "causality," bur rather point to factors that are related to moves (e.g., "risk factors") and associated outcomes of moves. Each individual student may have a different story to tell. But looking at years of student-level data can provide comprehensive and reliable patterns for us to examine.
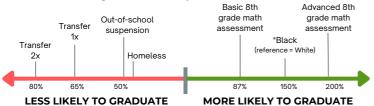
ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND TRANSFERRING

This study found that for St. Louis City students who are behind in reading or math by third grade, only about 60% finished 8th grade without an abrupt, mid-year school change at some point during their K-8 experience.

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

In St. Louis City, the odds of graduating are greatly affected by school transfer. When compared to students who never transferred and holding other factors constant, the odds of graduating were significantly decreased. Students were 53% less likely to graduate with one transfer and for students who transferred twice or more, they were 78% less likely to graduate. Transferring was a greater predictor of graduation than whether a student was homeless or suspended either once or twice.

Odds of Graduating in St. Louis City

Transfer 2x — 80%
Transfer 1x — 65%
Out-of-school suspension — 50%
Homeless

Basic 8th grade math assessment — 87%
*Black (reference = White) — 150%
Advanced 8th grade math assessment — 200%

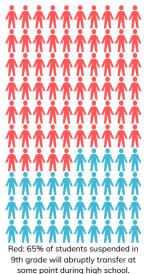**LESS LIKELY TO GRADUATE** ← → **MORE LIKELY TO GRADUATE**

- Students who report their race as Black comprise the largest proportion of students attending district or charter schools in St. Louis. Overall graduation rates are high in St. Louis, therefore, the likelihood of graduation for a student who is Black (versus White) is increased, while holding all other factors constant.

THE IMPACT OF DISCIPLINE AND TRANSFERRING

Students who were suspended in-school were 79% more likely to transfer before the end of a school year than their non-suspended peers, and students who were suspended out-of-school were 148% more likely to transfer before the end of a school year.

Of the students who were suspended during their freshman year, roughly 65% graduated high school without an abrupt, mid-year school change at some point during their high school education.

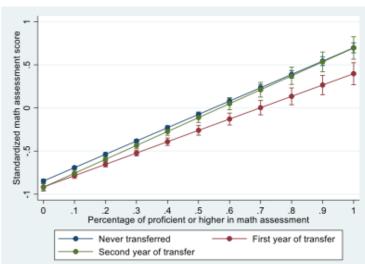Red: 65% of students suspended in 9th grade will abruptly transfer at some point during high school.

TRANSFERRING ISN'T ALWAYS A BAD THING...

Although our analyses found that transferring was related to worse academic performance in 3rd through 8th grade and increased likelihood of suspensions in high school, **some of the longer-term impacts of transferring depended on the type of school a student transferred to**.

For example, our analyses found when students transferred to schools with a higher proportion of students proficient in math, these students fared better, but not right away. After a period of "root shock", many of these students "bounced back." There was an adjustment time. During the first year of transferring, students performed worse on math assessments, but in in the second year, students who transferred tended to catch up with students who never transferred.

School Transfers and Math Proficiency

PARENT & TEACHER PERSPECTIVES

Qualitative study conducted by Dr. Amber Jones with support from the Qualitative Subcommittee: Dr. Deborah Schmidt, Dr. Leslie Muhammad, Dr. Warletta Brookins, Dr. Deanna Childress, and Dr. Andrew Butler.

This section highlights perspectives on student mobility from the people who witness it up front: teachers and parents. It centers individual experiences with student mobility and puts faces to what we see in the numbers.

We will point out several themes: First, the historical, social, and political context of living in the St. Louis area as a driver for student mobility. Next, we'll discuss the hidden drivers of what is counted as "mobility" in DESE data and discuss the many ways in which these challenges are not pointing to mobility, necessarily, but student experiences with schools.

WHO DID WE TALK TO?

This study was led by Dr. Amber Jones, St. Louis native and expert in the History of Education and African American History. Dr. Jones created a SRPC Qualitative Research subcommittee, comprised of educators and school support staff in SLPS and Charters. Together, they conducted 22 hour-long interviews with educators, parents, and students about student mobility in St. Louis. These interviews spanned north and south city, including SLPS, KIPP, and Confluence Academy educators and families.

Of the educators interviewed, seven were elementary school educators, five were secondary educators, and two were district level educators. Of the parents interviewed four discussed their elementary students and one discussed their secondary level students. Three student interviews were conducted. All student interviews were conducted with secondary students.

STUDENTS AND FAMILIES ARE SENSITIVE TO THE ECONOMY AND CITY POLICIES

Several educators discussed watching patterns of student mobility in St. Louis change in recent years.

One educator commented on first noticing a spike in student mobility in the aftermath of the 2008 housing crisis. This educator mentioned how larger financial recessions had a direct impact on student mobility. Specifically, they observed many landlords and property owners abandoning properties in North St. Louis. As a result, more students became mobile as their rents increased or their housing was no longer maintained.

One North St. Louis educator shared that seeing dramatic changes in the surrounding neighborhood was like removing screws from their school structure. "We did have different people in the neighborhood, but they moved out. There are too many empty houses. It's just even where I live, there's a lot of empty houses on this block where I live over here, in North City. Schools have closed over here where I am, so it's two of the screws."

Larger social issues in St. Louis and the country have many ways of trickling down into schools and sometimes take the form of student mobility. Housing rental rates and increased abandoned homes contribute to more people moving away from north city schools. This phenomenon is exacerbated by the proximity of north city and county districts.

The data presented previously demonstrate this, but one other issue we need to explore as perceived by educators and parents is that of "invisible mobility."

"INVISIBLE MOBILITY"

The concept of "invisible mobility" was described when discussing the perceived inflation of student mobility rates. Educators interviewed noted a feeling that student mobility data collected by the school was not fully defined.

Educators noted that "invisible" or "temporary" student mobility was characterized by:

1. Students leaving and returning to the same school in short succession.
2. Students moving out of a district or neighborhood without un-enrolling.
3. Student or family meeting the characteristics of "in transition" and are either unaware or choose not to communicate with school.

The next section details how invisible mobility presents itself to educators. Though the need to address these challenges are more than they may be able to offer support for, knowing the patterns can help us creatively come up with solutions.

> "We did have different people in the neighborhood, but they moved out. There are too many empty houses. It's just even where I live, there's a lot of empty houses on this block where I live."

"INVISIBLE MOBILITY"

In both our qualitative and quantitative studies, we find that DESE student mobility rates may be masking other challenges in schools with extremely high mobility rates.

STUDENTS LEAVING AND RETURNING TO THE SAME SCHOOL IN SHORT BURSTS

Several educators described situations working with students and families who will transfer for a short amount of time only to return. Scenarios like these took on many forms. Some educators expressed noticing that a family may not unenroll a student, enroll them in another school during the registration process, and then return to the original school later if there was an issue with registration. Educators from North and South City schools shared experiences with families that transferred schools for reasons of actual/perceived rigor, academic programs, and discipline only to transfer back later if the new school did not live up to expectations. They also shared that in their experience this phenomenon can also happen for reasons not relating to school quality. Some educators shared they saw families transfer out and back in quick succession in relation to parental employment and relationship changes. For whatever reason, several respondents noticed families go back and forth, sometimes several times, in and out of the same school.

One student shared their experience of transferring out and back into the same school over a year's time. The student explained that they had transferred schools originally because of perceived rigor and said, "It's the number one school, maybe better college prospects." However, after transferring to the school there was a false accusation against the student "because I resemble someone" and issues with a teacher that led to transferring back to their original school within the next year. Even in our small pool of respondents, there is evidence that many students experience invisible or temporary mobility that may not be captured by other data.

STUDENTS MOVING WITHOUT UNENROLLING FROM SCHOOL

A common experience from educators is that some highly mobile students are not accurately captured by the data because their mobility either starts long before it is reported or is never accurately reported. Educators repeatedly indicated that odd attendance patterns were the "canary in a coal mine," as an educator put it, for student mobility. When asked about the odd attendance patterns, educators shared that when they notice a sudden change in attendance and an inability to reach the family by other means, sometimes they discover a student mobility issue after the fact. One North City educator explained that when investigating attendance, they discovered "temporary" mobility in response to short-term financial issues.

"That's really the goal is to let me know early when you're in the process of moving or you've moved or you're about to, you know, something bad is about to happen, you're about to be evicted or when utilities are turned off, sometimes families move out of that home temporarily to go live with someone who has electricity or has their gas, or who has water," an educator said. "And so they get that figured out. That's like temporary mobility." This educator suggests that there are more students experiencing this "temporary" mobility that can be seen better through attendance patterns.

STUDENTS MEETING "IN TRANSITION" STATUS BUT ARE EITHER UNAWARE OR CHOOSE NOT TO COMMUNICATE IT TO THE SCHOOL

Educators talked about the number of reasons students may move, including challenges at home that lead to parents breaking up or having to stay with family and friends. Because families aren't sure how long this situation will last, many may not officially state their "in transition" to schools. One teacher said, "Sometimes, if they still have transportation, they're still able to get to school, they don't necessarily need to be in the program and they won't necessarily tell us like, you know, we're moving around every couple of weeks or whatever." Though resources may be available, there may be a lack of awareness or stigma.

Invisible mobility has differing solutions. Schools can use this guide to identify which types of mobility are most affecting their schools and tailor interventions accordingly.

EDUCATOR RECOMMENDATIONS TO SUPPORT STUDENTS WHO TRANSFER SCHOOLS IN ST. LOUIS

Suggestions were posed by practitioners interviewed by Dr. Amber Jones., Dr. Leslie Muhammed, Dr. Deborah Schmidt, Kelly Garrett, Dr. Candice Carter-Oliver, and other SRPC educators.

The reasons for student mobility are multi-faceted and span individual, family, school, and city-level dynamics. The following ideas were posed by educators who provided insight through interviews and engagement sessions. This list isn't comprehensive, but serves as a starting place to foster programmatic supports for schools, city-level supports for family stability, and state-level administrative initiatives. Schools may consider what they can do in their unique environments to provide support to educators and families that maximize opportunities for students to thrive.

AMPLIFY AND COORDINATE SERVICES FOR STUDENTS "IN TRANSITION"

1. **Building-Level Staffing for Students In Transition.** Educators talked about the need for more staffing in buildings to support students in transition. One teacher noted that she served as the "middleman" between the family and schools to secure transportation with the cab company and other needs, such as clothing and laundry. This role could be staffed by school social workers or others as a liaison to reduce coordination efforts by teachers.
2. **Rental Assistance and Housing Support.** Transfers drastically reduced for students in St. Louis City during the pandemic, perhaps due to eviction moratoriums and reduced student interaction with schools and thereby less disciplinary events. The combination of the two stabilized a population that was previously on the move. City leaders could consider the creation of a rental assistance and housing fund for families with children to minimize disruptions to social and emotional wellness and schools.
3. **Coordination with Existing City-Level Supports**. Consider seamless partnerships with entities like the Continuum of Care in St. Louis to make it easier for families in need to receive full-service supports.

SCHOOL SUPPORTS AND DISCIPLINE

Disciplinary incidents in the 9th grade were also predictive of future transfer.

- **High School Connection and Prevention Programming.** Increasing peer and teacher connection and reducing behavioral incidents in 9th grade are key to keeping students in the same school. The highly-effective Chicago Public Schools model for Freshmen OnTrack fosters positive engagement and school connection to ensure students feel connected and are engaged in high school.
- **High School Connection and Prevention Programming. .** For 9th grade students who have been placed into detention or suspended, schools can work with educators and peers to foster a supportive process that restores and provides a positive experience while reentering the school community.

ENHANCE RECORD-SHARING PRACTICES

Teachers and educators said it would help to have a record of a student's previous courses and documentation of any special supports that have been provided to students across schools.

- **Automate student "e-file" sharing across institutions, similar to a Protected Health Information record.** Transcripts, including courses and other information, standardized across MOSIS IDs, could be more useful if they were automatically accessible to schools and teachers enrolling new students. Many departments of education are pursuing similar initiatives while recognizing FERPA protections. See Houston's Independent School District utilization of the Texas Records Exchange.

STRIVE FOR ACADEMIC THRIVING

Keeping students academically up to grade level by 3rd grade mitigates school transfer. Increasing proficiency in schools leads to better academic outcomes for transfer students too. Schools can support students by fostering growth in their own academic achievement, but also acknowledging that moving schools may initially affect a transfer student's performance compared to peers, but that with an adjustment time, the transfer student will catch up.

Study Limitations & FAQS

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There are numerous limitations that should be considered when examining the data from this brief.

First, our analysis did not include any identification of causal relationships. For example, it is not possible to say that being in 9th grade causes one to transfer schools — they are simply associated in a statistically significant way.

Second, while we were able to account for discrepancies between building- and student-level data, the way transfer codes were utilized from school-to-school may differ, introducing measurement error into the findings. There is a need to discuss with practitioners what exactly these data represent. For instance, same-school transfers represent records who are shown as a transfer out but not picked up by another school. Practitioners have noted this may be due to students missing school then coming back, but there is no way to tell for sure from the data. The proportion of these same school transfers differs for each LEA.

Next, we were only able to hypothesize connections for data that were available from DESE. In the future, it would be helpful to understand the potential positive impact of school culture or teacher-to-student connection on mitigating future transfers. Anecdotally, these protective factors may mitigate transfer in schools with high levels of social and economic challenge. Additionally, understanding the role of eviction moratoriums on specific homeless students would have been useful, but data was not available at that concrete level of detail. Future endeavors should consider what may be protective as measures and incorporate new measures into analyses.

Why are the student mobility rates smaller than in the first brief?

In the first report, we looked at DESE's publicly available building-level data. DESE's data included transfer in and outs in the numerator of total enrollment. In this student-level report, we focus only on students who transfer out of a school (not transfer ins); and transfers occurring during the school year (not summer transfers). If students were not enrolled in another school though they were labeled as transferring out, there were also excluded.

What have we learned that educators did not already know?

One of the most important findings from this research demonstrates that not all transfer is negative for students who move to a higher performing school--at least after an adjustment period and if they stay longer than two years. Despite this data, many students do not have access to schools with a high percentage of students performing at higher levels of academic achievement.

We do know, however, that every transfer can beget more transfers, so learning how to create more comfortable environments for students who transfer in and finding ways to engage students who are at risk of detention or suspension can make a big impact on whether a student stays or leaves again.