



# A Revolving Door: Challenges and Solutions to Educating Mobile Students

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Collaboration with MassINC's  
Gateway Cities Initiative



# Why Student Mobility Matters

The problem of students changing schools in the middle of the school year is not new. The consequences of these changes, however, are increasingly dire. Student mobility, defined as students' movement in and out of schools and school districts during a school year, is particularly prevalent among low-income, immigrant and minority children, whose families are often susceptible to changes in housing that precipitate changes in the schools they attend. In an era in which all students are held to high standards, the disruption caused by moving from school to school—sometimes multiple times within one school year—can have devastating results for mobile students as well as the teachers and non-mobile students in the schools from which these students depart and to which they arrive.

Yet, the topic of student mobility can be contentious. Most educators who serve large populations of mobile students know the multitude of challenges mobile students face and strive to provide the corresponding supports needed to ensure these students' success. Skeptics worry that educators may use high student mobility rates as an excuse for not improving their levels of achievement. For some, pleas from educators for more staff and longer timelines to meet accountability targets for mobile students raise concerns. While an unwavering focus on ensuring that all students are college- and career-ready is essential, it is impossible to ignore the challenges faced by educators in the districts and schools serving large populations of mobile students. Consider the following data:

**Student mobility is concentrated in the state's lowest performing districts.** Within the 9 districts that have the 35 lowest performing schools in the state (referred to as Level 4 schools), 45,914 students changed schools at least once during the 2008–09 school year, accounting for 45% of all mobile students statewide.<sup>1</sup>

**Research suggests that mobility has a negative impact on mobile students' academic achievement.**<sup>2</sup> A recent Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) study revealed that mobile students' performance lagged behind their less mobile peers on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) English language arts and mathematics tests by a staggering 24 percentage points on each test. Median student growth percentiles (SGP)<sup>3</sup> were also lower for mobile students on both tests.<sup>4</sup> Even among students with similar socioeconomic backgrounds, mobile students did not perform as well as less mobile students on either exam.<sup>5</sup>

**In Massachusetts, low-income, Hispanic, Black and special education students are disproportionately more mobile than their peers.**<sup>6</sup> This is particularly troubling since these are the same students who have lower academic achievement levels, as evidenced by Massachusetts' achievement gap between minority and low-income students and their white, more affluent peers.

**High mobility rates are most common in the state's urban districts.** This means compounding the challenges that urban districts face, these districts must also address the needs of students whose education is more likely to have been interrupted and sporadic.

**There are 21 Massachusetts districts in which 20% or more of the students enter or leave during the school year.** For example, in 2009–10, in Springfield about 6,350 students—23% of the total student population—transferred into or out of schools in the district. In Springfield's High School of Commerce, about 600 students (37% of the student body) entered or left during the school year. Such high rates of turnover disrupt the flow of instruction and the amount of mate-

1 Based on figures from the 2008-09 school year reported by Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in *Student Mobility Rates in Massachusetts Public Schools*, 2007–08 and 2008–09.

2 For a review of published research on academic and non-academic outcomes of student mobility, see: United States Government Accountability Office (November 2010). *K-12 Education: Many Challenges Arise in Educating Students Who Change Schools Frequently*, GAO-11-40.

3 Student Growth Percentiles measure how much student performance changed relative to other students statewide with similar scores in previous years.

4 Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (August 2010). *Education Research Brief: Student Mobility in Massachusetts*.

5 *Ibid.*

6 Based on figures from the 2008-09 school year reported in: O'Donnell, R & Gazos, A. (August 2010). *Student Mobility in Massachusetts*. Malden, MA: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

rial that can be taught in the classroom, put a strain on administrative and guidance staff who are responsible for in-take, assessment and placement of new students, and impact school culture.

**Student mobility is prevalent among Massachusetts' Gateway Cities.**<sup>7</sup> In the 11 school districts in the Gateway Cities, 35,000 students moved at least once during the 2008–09 school year, representing 35% of all mobile students statewide. In some of these districts, nearly one-third of the students changed schools during the course of the year.

**The purpose of *A Revolving Door: Challenges and Solutions to Educating Mobile Students* is to shed light on the challenges associated with high rates of student mobility in order to best identify and disseminate promising strategies for overcoming these challenges.** The report describes the scale of Massachusetts' student mobility problem and the challenges student mobility presents in 11 schools in 6 Gateway City districts (Brockton, Fitchburg, Haverhill, Holyoke, Springfield, and Worcester). The report also provides examples of promising strategies for mitigating the negative impact of mobility. The final section puts forth considerations for action for Massachusetts policymakers.

The report is intended to highlight the issue of student mobility and focus policymakers' attention on the changes needed in policy and practice at state and local levels to best serve these students. The ultimate goal is to ensure that mobile students are provided with every opportunity to receive the high quality education that will enable them to become successful, productive citizens.

## Challenges

The report includes findings from interviews with 43 school and district staff members in the 6 Gateway Cities school districts listed above. At the schools selected for this study, student turnover was high, ranging from 40% of students entering or leaving during the 2009–10 school year to a low of 16%. While moves occur for a variety of reasons, school and district staff cited housing instability, immigration, changes in employment and family instability as the primary causes of mobility for their students.

### School- and District-level Challenges

Some mobile students excel both academically and socially and make a positive contribution to the school community. But this study revealed that, overall, student mobility presents schools with challenges that are not easy to overcome. School and district staff described the following challenges to meeting the needs of large populations of mobile students:

- **Students are behind academically.** For example, some five- and six-year-old students who move to the United States from other countries have not had any formal schooling, and some older students may not have been required to attend school after a certain grade.
- **Students arrive without their academic records, requiring more effort from staff at the receiving schools and making placement decisions difficult.** The lag time between the students' arrival and the arrival of their records varies from a few days to a few months, and in some cases, records never arrive. In schools where in-take rates are high, this lack of information presents a challenge. For example, in Brockton High, close to 400 new students enrolled throughout the course of the 2009–10 school year. Thus, in addition to ensuring the college/career readiness of its 3,630 non-mobile students, faculty and guidance counselors must also assess, place and tailor the education for nearly 400 new students—a much larger scale challenge than that faced by high schools with lower in-take rates.
- **Mobile students are often adjusting to myriad changes—a new school is just one of them.** Students from other countries may be learning a new language, adjusting to a new living situation, learning new social customs, and assimilating into a new community. Other students may be in a new school because of a traumatic incident at home, such as domestic violence or incarceration of a parent. Students who live in poverty may have inadequate living conditions, lack food or proper clothing or be in need of dental or health care, which may add to or exacerbate the

<sup>7</sup> Gateway Cities are the 11 former industrial mill cities deemed “gateways” to the next era of the state's economic success and key portals for their diverse, often foreign-born, residents' ongoing pursuit of the American Dream.



challenges associated with attending a new school. Finally, some students have behavioral and mental health issues, or are in other ways emotionally unprepared to do school work.

- **Student mobility makes meeting accountability targets and timelines more difficult.** Some question the fairness of comparing their school's performance to schools with less mobile student bodies. For example, one principal explained that student mobility impacts her ability to execute her "game plan"—"I've got a game plan [for providing targeted interventions to struggling students]. And mid-year, I look at the students, and 40 of them are gone, and I have 60 new ones. So now I've got to re-invent and change my plan."

## Classroom-level Challenges

- **Impacts relationship-building and student engagement.** Mobile students have a diverse and complex range of needs that can impact teachers' ability to successfully integrate them into the classroom and engage them in class work.
- **Can disrupt the pace of learning and the amount of material that can be covered by the whole class.** Teachers described the initial challenge of assessing new students' academic needs and devising a strategy for getting them on track. Students who have significant gaps in their learning or in literacy and English language skills require individualized attention. In addition, teachers often adjust instruction for the whole class to accommodate the needs of new students. It is common for teachers to go over material that they have already taught and slow down their pace when teaching new material.
- **May change the classroom dynamic.** Teachers explained that when students are entering and leaving throughout the school year, it is difficult to build and maintain a sense of community in the classroom. Students who are new to the class are unfamiliar with their classmates, as well as with classroom routines and expectations for behavior, all of which can impact group work or self-directed activities and slow down transitions from one lesson to another.

During interviews with classroom teachers, they were invited to have their students participate in an optional drawing exercise in which students were asked to draw a picture of how the class changes and how it makes them feel when a new student joins the class or a classmate leaves. Overall, students were more likely to notice the social or emotional impact of student mobility rather than the academic impact.

## Potential Solutions

### Solutions Proposed by Study Participants

School and district leaders described the following types of assistance as being necessary to overcoming some of the challenges associated with student mobility:

- **Improvements in the in-take, assessment and placement process for students;**
- **A mechanism for obtaining and sharing promising practices;**
- **Teacher professional development;**
- **A more flexible funding system that responds to changes in the size and composition of the student body during the school year;**
- **An accountability system that takes student mobility into consideration;**
- **Additional support staff**, such as a new student coordinator, academic specialists, staff to support students' social, emotional and behavioral needs and a family liaison; and
- **Student services**, such as school-based health and academic services as well as school-based support for families, community partnerships, transportation for students and assistance with data analysis at the district level.

## Solutions Drawn from Research and Literature

A review of recent research and literature revealed the following school, district and state education policies designed to address challenges associated with student mobility.<sup>8</sup> Some of these strategies are in place in schools and districts that participated in this study.

### *School-level Strategies*

- **Increase student engagement** through practices such as assigning new students a “buddy” or ambassador, sponsoring schoolwide activities to engage the student body in getting to know new students, or encouraging new students’ participation in extracurricular activities.
- **Implement tutoring programs.**
- **Increase family engagement** by creating an orientation video in the dominant languages of the school community, establishing a “welcoming committee” of school staff and other parents and providing parents with resources to support their students’ learning.

### *District-level Strategies*

- **Conduct immediate and comprehensive screening of new students.** Administering short assessments in key content areas can provide information that can be used to place students into classes and is particularly useful when students arrive without academic records.
- **Provide professional development for teachers.** Typically, teacher preparation programs do not include strategies for assessing and meeting the needs of students who enter throughout the year or how to provide adequate instruction to stable students in a highly mobile classroom.
- **Understand patterns of mobility.** If district staff members understand where the majority of their mobile students are coming from and to what schools they are likely to go, they may be better positioned to overcome the challenges posed by high student turnover.
- **Standardize the curriculum, programs and policies.** Standardizing curriculum, instructional programs and assessments as well as having common expectations among all schools within the district would make placement decisions easier for school staff and provide consistency for students who transfer within the district. However, this must be balanced with efforts to provide schools with the autonomy needed to adequately respond to the unique needs of their students and community.

### *State Strategies*

- **Establish a statewide electronic record-keeping system that facilitates rapid exchange of student records.** State agencies should develop the ability to electronically transfer the contents of a student’s transcript and other related information when a student moves to another school.
- **Foster interagency collaboration to address the root causes of student mobility.** State education agencies should work collaboratively to collect and analyze information about the causes of student mobility and address the root problems, such as lack of affordable housing and unsafe neighborhoods.
- **Build awareness about the consequences of mobility.** The literature suggests that educating parents about the consequences of switching schools is one way to reduce student mobility.

8 See full report for citations.

# Considerations for Massachusetts Policymakers

Informed by the research findings presented in this report, we offer the following considerations for state policymakers.

1. **Develop the Readiness Passport and incorporate individual indicators of student mobility.** In 2008, as a component of his education strategy, Massachusetts Governor Patrick convened the Commonwealth Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet. The cabinet was charged with creating a statewide child and youth data reporting system, or Readiness Passport. Among other objectives, the Passport would facilitate smooth transitions for students moving between schools.
2. **Expand current efforts to better understand the implications of student mobility and support the districts most impacted by it.** We urge the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) to consider conducting additional research. One study to consider involves examining the patterns of student mobility across the state in order to identify the clusters of school districts that routinely exchange mobile students. Once those clusters have been identified, DESE should consider providing technical assistance and financial support to those districts, perhaps through Readiness Centers, so they can work together to establish regional policies and practices for mitigating the challenges associated with student mobility. For example, districts may wish to consider regionalizing particular activities such as in-take and assessment of new students or parent/family outreach and engagement, or they may consider aligning curricula and instructional programs.
3. **Develop a more flexible and responsive funding system.** Consider modifying the funding system so there is a mechanism that allows schools to receive additional funding when the size and composition of the student body changes during the school year. Rather than determining the budget for the year, consider examining budgets quarterly and adjusting them based on actual enrollment and characteristics of the student body. Consider a minimum funding level that uses the October 1 prior year enrollment. This would allow schools with high mobility rates the flexibility to adjust staffing and resources as needed, while ensuring some stability in the funding stream.
4. **While holding all students to high standards, consider how to incorporate student mobility into the state accountability system.** Policymakers are urged to consider ways to acknowledge schools and districts that serve a constantly changing, high-need student body in the state accountability systems and may wish to consider identifying mobile students as a special subgroup of students in the same way as students who receive special education services and English language learners. Policymakers may also consider separate reporting of academic outcomes for mobile and non-mobile students. Reporting outcomes separately for mobile and non-mobile students will provide a more accurate picture of whether or not schools and districts with high mobility rates are making progress with both the stable and mobile segments of their student body.
5. **Encourage schools of education to include coursework and training on working with mobile students.** State education leaders and policymakers may wish to encourage schools of education to include in their teacher preparation programs—especially those aimed at preparing urban teachers—discussions about the needs and most effective instructional practices for working with highly mobile students and non-mobile students attending highly mobile schools.
6. **Promote interagency collaboration to address the root causes of student mobility.** Collaboration among state agencies is required to address the root causes of student mobility, such as housing instability and issues related to family instability. Massachusetts' Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet is a state leadership team focused on streamlining state efforts to improve services for children, youth and families that is jointly chaired by the Secretary of Education and the Secretary of Health and Human Services.<sup>9</sup> Reducing student mobility and addressing the challenges schools and districts face in meeting the needs of mobile students are issues the Cabinet may wish to consider as priority areas for collaborative state action. Literature on student mobility suggests that a first step is for state education agencies to collect and analyze information about the causes of student mobility and collaborate with appropriate state agencies to address the root problems.

9 For more information about the Child and Youth Readiness Cabinet, see: Rennie Center for Education Research & Policy (2009). *Toward Interagency Collaboration: The Role of Children's Cabinets*. Available online: [http://renniecenter.israelab.org/research/listing/toward\\_interagency\\_collaboration\\_the\\_role\\_of\\_childrens\\_cabinets](http://renniecenter.israelab.org/research/listing/toward_interagency_collaboration_the_role_of_childrens_cabinets).

## Conclusion

This report makes clear that mobile students and those who serve large populations of them face real and serious challenges that result in mobile students' outcomes lagging far behind those of their less mobile peers. If the Commonwealth is truly committed to closing its persistent achievement gaps, it is essential to acknowledge and work to overcome the challenges faced by mobile students and those who serve them. It is time to stop ignoring the impact that high rates of student mobility have on students and schools and to move decisively toward action. We urge state policymakers—especially those focused on education and health and human services—to focus immediate attention and efforts on preventing and reducing student mobility as well as mitigating its impact on students' opportunities to learn and achieve to their fullest potential.

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## About MassINC's Gateway Cities Initiative

The Massachusetts Institute for a New Commonwealth (MassINC) is a nonpartisan not-for-profit organization devoted to promoting a public agenda to support the growth and vitality of the middle class. Since 2007, MassINC has worked with 11 key regional Gateway Cities to rekindle the social, economic, and civic innovation that older industrial communities need to compete and prosper in the nation's 21st century economy. This effort leverages research, and a network of local leaders and engaged citizens, to identify policy priorities and propel action on a comprehensive, evidence-based, community-change agenda. Visit [www.massinc.org](http://www.massinc.org) to read MassINC's most recent report, *Going for Growth: New Education-Housing Partnerships to Stabilize Mobile Families and Boost Student Achievement*.

## About RENNIE CENTER for Education Research & Policy

The Rennie Center's mission is to develop a public agenda that informs and promotes significant improvement in public education in Massachusetts. Our work is motivated by a vision of an education system that creates the opportunity to educate every child to be successful in life, citizenship, employment and life-long learning. Applying non-partisan, independent research, journalism and civic engagement, the Rennie Center is creating a civil space to foster thoughtful public discourse to inform and shape effective policy. For more information, please visit, [www.renniecenter.org](http://www.renniecenter.org).

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The full report, *A Revolving Door: Challenges and Solutions to Educating Mobile Students*, can be found and downloaded at: <http://www.renniecenter.issuelab.org>.