

Housing and Early Education: Policy Opportunities for Reducing Student Mobility

By Ethan Prall, Harvard Law School

Reducing student mobility is increasingly a focus for education policymakers. Research shows that the act of changing schools and/or residences can have a disruptive effect on the continuity of learning, thus placing mobile children at an educational disadvantage compared to non-mobile peers.¹ The “churn” or mobility rate for K-12 students in Massachusetts was 9% in 2013. However, the rate is higher for students from low-income families (14%), African American and Latino students (15% and 17% respectively) and English language learners (22%).² In Gateway Cities, mobility rates exceed state averages: 16% in Chelsea, 19% in Worcester, and 24% in Holyoke. While stable housing does impact children’s well-being, school mobility tends to impact students more seriously than does residential mobility by itself.³

Traditionally, public education and public housing have occupied separate space in the policy arena. But recent research has uncovered the impact of stable housing on the well-being of children, including their educational performance. Stable housing helps decrease student mobility, as residential mobility is one of the main reasons why children change schools. Though there is limited research on the impact of mobility in early education and care settings, K-12 students who are mobile tend to have lower educational outcomes.⁴ Important student data is often not transferred to the new educational setting. The disruption also affects teachers and other students in the classroom.

Policy context

In today’s high-skill knowledge-based economy, in which all students are expected to complete high school and post-secondary education, the commonwealth cannot afford to let mobility effects have a negative impact on student achievement and opportunity. Policymakers should seek new ways to reduce mobility or mitigate its effects on student learning, while also crafting new strategies to support family residential stability.

To meet the challenge of mobility, Massachusetts needs innovative ideas and cross-silo policy discussions. Public housing and public education (both K-12 and early education and care) can and should collaborate to address this problem in new ways. Housing policy has the flexibility to provide various incentives and supports to families.

New policy opportunities provide a starting point for collaboration. As part of the Early Learning Challenge—Race to the Top grant, The Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) established an interagency agreement with the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). That agreement creates and funds a position that focuses on the interaction between the two departments (to be housed at DHCD). The ELC runs through December 2015, giving the departments time to frame the position, although it is not clear whether there are plans to do so at the moment.

About the report

In 2013, Strategies for Children commissioned Harvard Law School student Ethan Prall to investigate the opportunities for policy alignment between the early education and public housing sectors.

This is relatively uncharted waters for public policy as the research found, and presents several opportunities for public systems and supports that are better suited to the needs of families with young children living in public housing.

For a copy of the full report, visit the research publications section of our website www.strategiesforchildren.org or contact Titus DosRemedios, director of research and policy at tdosremedios@strategiesforchildren.org.

Key points

- Public housing and public education often work in separate policy “silos” with little collaboration between sectors.
- Massachusetts’ Early Learning Challenge grant provides an opportunity for collaboration.
- Housing regulations allow for flexibility in state policymaking—an ample opportunity for innovation.

At the local level, Massachusetts has 241 state Housing Authorities, each with a significant amount of local discretion in the administration of their funds. Directors of these local housing authorities vary widely with respect to how much they tailor their programs to support education. While preserving flexibility to tailor offerings to meet local needs, this autonomy presents challenges to state policymakers who seek to standardize best-practices.

Conversations about early childhood education are not typical in the Massachusetts housing policy community. Housing Authorities, by their nature, tend to encourage promotional mobility, and they have not yet begun to distinguish the problems that *non*-promotional mobility creates for students. Substantial research on this problem remains underdeveloped, contributing to the persistence of lower educational outcomes. Housing Authorities cannot replace schools or early education centers, but their policies do impact student mobility and there is room for reform in this area. Furthermore, there are ample opportunities for collaboration between public housing and early education programs, both center- and school-based, and creative partnerships between these sectors should be encouraged.

Policy Opportunities

After reviewing the existing literature and speaking at length to key policy informants, four distinct recommendations emerge.

1. **Data:** State agencies should devise data tracking systems to monitor student mobility patterns. Insights gained should inform policy and programmatic support strategies.
 - Unfortunately, Massachusetts currently lacks a data system that allows it to track the residences and mobility of its families receiving low-income housing vouchers. On its website, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (ESE) annually reports state and district mobility rates by student subgroup. EEC does not currently track residential or student mobility data for children birth to age five.
 - State agencies should develop a database for tracking individual families and indexing their residential information to information about the ages and enrollment locations of their children.
 - A statewide data tracking system, that includes information on English proficiency, ESL, and low-income status for students, could enable DHCD, EEC, and local schools, care centers, and Housing Authorities to ascertain when and how residential mobility affects a child’s educational stability.
 - The state’s ongoing kindergarten readiness efforts present another opportunity. Local districts should examine kindergarten registration protocols and add “housing status” to the information collected from incoming students and their families. The state could provide guidance on how best to implement this.
2. **Vouchers:** The state should use its discretionary power to contract for family stability.
 - Like the Tacoma Housing Authority (see sidebar), Housing Authorities in Massachusetts have special status under the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to administer Section 8 housing vouchers. Under the federal Moving to Work program, Public Housing Authorities within the state could modify their use of Section 8 funds. One example of this would

Local Model: Tacoma, Washington

Since 2011, the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) has partnered with a local elementary school (McCarver Elementary) to utilize housing vouchers to improve early education. This unique partnership involves a two-pronged approach: stabilizing families by conditioning rental support upon them keeping their students at McCarver; and developing curriculum reform. The project supplements these goals with a robust data-sharing system.

The program stipulates that parents must meet five conditions to continue receiving rental vouchers.

1. Keep their child enrolled at McCarver Elementary School (ensuring stability),
2. Stay involved with their child’s education by attending THA and PTA meetings,
3. Work toward finding permanent, sufficient employment,
4. Work with the THA staff for counseling purposes, and
5. Share data on their financial progress and their child’s progress in school.

LOOKING AHEAD: Outcome data and program evaluation should be made a priority, and would provide strategic guidance in the years ahead as the program continues to evolve.

be to allow families to allocate increases in income to escrow accounts rather than to a higher percentage of their rental payments.⁵ Thinking creatively, such escrow accounts could be tied to helping defray the cost of early education and care, potentially with additional help from matching state funds.

- As another example, Section 8 voucher contracts could be modified to require families with elementary-age children to remain within a certain geographic distance of their child’s school or care center, or within the school district.⁶ These approaches would create a stronger incentive for families to join the program and stay within a certain geographic area.
3. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Local and regional civic leaders should partner to meet this challenge.
- The student mobility challenge and the cross-silo nature of potential solutions make this work a natural fit for creative public/private partnerships at the local level. Springfield’s Talk/Read/Succeed initiative is one example of how diverse actors can come together to craft evidence-based, comprehensive programs that support families (see sidebar). Until adequate public funding becomes available, local leaders can take matters into their own hands and direct philanthropic efforts to the issue, raise awareness through local media, and organize likely and unlikely allies into an initial base of support.
4. **Mitigation:** School districts should devise creative solutions to minimize the negative effects of mobility on student learning.
- Schools and early education and care centers can put in place certain policies to mitigate the effects of residential instability on educational outcomes. Mary Bourque, Superintendent of the Chelsea School District, in partnership with school leaders in neighboring communities, has implemented curriculum reform in Chelsea and the four contiguous districts to which many of its mobile students move. This reform aims to standardize curricula so when children move between any of the five districts, the curriculum of their new classroom will look familiar and their learning trajectory can continue with minimal disruption. In addition to a common curriculum, the model also pushes for funding a new, full-time administrator who works on curriculum integration between the districts.
 - Additional strategies to mitigate the effects of instability include the following:
 - Improve the quality of schools for handling high-mobility students by targeting those students with additional psychological and educational assistance.
 - Use school counselors for problem-solving to determine how to remain at the school.
 - Prepare for transfer students by using “new student” groups, monitoring their records from prior schools, and preparing welcome packets in all classes.

Local Model: Springfield, Massachusetts

The Irene E. & George A. Davis Foundation targets the early literacy and early education needs of low-income children in Springfield, Massachusetts. In 2009, with support from the W.K. Kellogg foundation, the Davis Foundation developed a comprehensive, place-based strategy for meeting those needs. The project, Talk/Read/Succeed (TRS), is a multi-faceted early literacy program for public housing residents in Springfield.

The Davis Foundation began the process first by investing in face-to-face conversations with local families to determine their needs. The Kellogg grant provided \$200,000 for 2 years to hire outreach workers. Davis proceeded to hire two full-time case managers, working out of the Regional Employment Board (REB). The head of the REB was eager to partner because he saw a high economic return on investment for the initiative.

In addition to out-of-school time literacy programs and services, the program provides support for mental health services in the community, an example of the kind of neighborhood revitalization that is supported by many in the housing community.

LOOKING AHEAD: Sustainability of funding is a concern for projects like TRS. WKCF’s philanthropic seed funding has not been sustained beyond year two of the initiative. Promising local initiatives should stay flexible and seek a blended funding model, while continually communicating successes to partners, funders, and the general public.

“The state should identify the ‘urban clusters,’ those school districts which exchange mobile students over and over ... and help school districts to regionalize student registration and transfer policies, align curricula and academic area scope and sequences, review and purchase of textbooks, and implement instructional programs and practices to minimize gaps and/or repetition of academic objectives. All are impactful mitigating steps.”

Mary Bourque,
Chelsea Public Schools Superintendent

- Educate parents about consequences of school transfers for their children.
- Fund a busing policy, though schools sometimes resist this because of the support for neighborhood schools.
- Additionally, parents should have personal copies of educational records for their children in order to facilitate the transition between schools or care centers.

Sources & Acknowledgements

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About the Researcher

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¹ See for example, Russell Rumberger, *The Causes and Consequences of Student Mobility*, 72 J. Negro Educ. 1, 6 (2003).

² Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. (December 9, 2013). Mobility Rates 2013. Retrieved from <http://profiles.doe.mass.edu/mobility/default.aspx?orgcode=00000000&fycode=2013&orgtypecode=0&>.

³ Len Biernat and Christine Jax. *Limiting Mobility and Improving Student Achievement*, 23 Hamline L. Rev. 1, 15 (1999).

⁴ Mobile students do tend to have lower first grade performance and higher poverty levels, which could help explain their later poor performance as well. See Mary Margaret Bourque and Mary H. Shann, *The Impact of Student Mobility on Urban School Districts in Massachusetts*, Dissertation for Boston University School of Education, 6 (2008).

⁵ Arthur Jemison, Interview.

⁶ For more discussion, see Biernat, *Limiting Mobility*, at 23.