

## Mobility Matters

*Transient students present teachers and principals with both challenges and advantages.*

Nancy Matheis

**W**hether in urban or rural districts, students are becoming increasingly mobile. This boy's story is typical:

*I was in the middle of the first grade when my family moved. Suddenly I was in a new school. Everything was unfamiliar—the teacher, the students, and the work. The work was what terrified me. The new class was way ahead of my old one, or at least it seemed that way to me. They were writing letters I hadn't learned yet. And there was a way to do everything that everyone seemed to know except me. So when the teacher said, "Class, put your name on your paper in the right place," I had no idea what she meant. Each day things came up that I didn't know how to do. Each time, I felt lost and overwhelmed (Dweck, 2006).*

Student transiency can result from internal factors, such as expulsion, getting into the wrong crowd, or a family's dissatisfaction with a particular school. External factors are also common, including job relocation, need for affordable housing, migrant work, natural disasters, and homelessness. Poor and minority students move most often (Schafft, 2005), and studies of student mobility clearly show the correlation between economically disadvantaged students, number of moves, and lower grades (Sanderson, 2003).

Student transience is a fact of our culture and we must recognize the effects it has on schools. In 12 years overseas as principal of two international schools, I experienced many students coming and going, as if through a revolving door. I saw firsthand the necessity of training my teachers about the challenges and advantages presented by these "international nomads," as well as instructing other students about them.

### Challenges and Advantages

Incoming transient students are often behind in core subjects, more likely to get into trouble, and require more instructional time for teachers. It is usually difficult to successfully absorb a large number of new students into a class, and test scores and graduation rates are negatively affected when a class or school has many transient students. Bonding among peers and with teachers becomes more difficult. All of these issues affect class and school climate, as well as a school's performance ranking.

Instead of looking at the negative effects transient students might have on their classes and schools, we should look at their positive attributes. If we can help them tap into their inherent strengths, they will benefit not only themselves but also other students and the school. For example, transient students are often very adaptable and flexible. They often have confidence in the face of change because of their ability to accept what life throws at them and do more than survive. Let them help others by talking about how they accept change.

These students also can be great listeners. They gain empathy for others facing loss and separation through a sharpened perspective on life.

Finally, transient students focus on the present and recognize its importance. However, they may need help planning for the future and setting appropriate goals.

These traits demonstrate the resiliency of transient students. By building a trusting relationship with them, teachers can help them to develop and use their strengths. Some are very eager and happy to be in a new school because they may have left a challenging situation and are aware they can start over. They can leave behind reputations as students who got into trouble,

didn't work hard, or were consistently late with everything. They are ready to establish a new identity.

But there are other new students who are angry and bitter at leaving friends, an ideal home, a fun city, or a comfortable school. These students can experience major grief, which shows itself in nervousness, withdrawal, anger, and behavior problems.

### What Teachers Can Do

Despite (or because of) the behavioral, academic, and instructional-time challenges associated with transient students, here are some actions that teachers can to ease their transition:

- Create a "buddy" program, using carefully chosen students to help quickly integrate new students both academically and socially;
- Enlist classroom aides to orient students and answer their questions;
- Allow new students to share their experiences with the class when they are comfortable doing so;
- Help them become accepted and contributing class members as soon as possible;
- Be watchful of symptoms that might demonstrate prolonged or excessive grief and anger, which can contribute to behavior issues; and
- Help them develop new and positive identities by being a trustworthy adult.

### What Principals Can Do

Many principals are already taking steps to create a welcoming environment and inclusive atmosphere for transient students. Some suggestions include:

- Give them opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities at orientation and through direct invitations by coaches or staff sponsors;
- Put into practice effective policies for speedy transfer of student documents;
- Communicate with previous administrators when questions concerning documentation arise;
- Assess academic skills promptly;
- Provide immediate tutoring support for students who need help;
- Train teachers and staff regarding the advantages and challenges presented by transient students, and introduce them to available resources and services; and
- Know specific demographics or categories for mobile students, and have access to a database of details such as the time of year mobile students arrive and leave, and their grade levels.

Having been a mobile student during my K-12 years, I fully empathize with these students. As an administrator, I went to great lengths to help them, their peers, and their teachers adapt. I hope you will do the same. It's rewarding!

### References

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### On the Same Page

Here are suggested questions that principals and teachers can use to spark discussion about how to apply the points made in this article to their particular schools.

1. What do we know about the mobile students in our school community?
2. What are the most common internal and external factors for student mobility at our school?
3. What are some of the inherent strengths that transient students exhibit, and how do these characteristics affect school climate?
4. How can we reach out to parents to help ease the transition for transient students?