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Highly Mobile Students in the Elementary Classroom

By: Bailey M. Hough

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
Graduation from the Western Oregon University Honors Program

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Why Do We Care About Highly Mobile Students?

Surprisingly, given the history of movement in the United States, there is not a lot of research done on the effect of high mobility, or frequent moves, on students. There is little information on which teaching and intervention techniques work best for highly mobile students. This is because, by their very nature of being “highly mobile,” often they are not in schools long enough for teachers to really see if the implemented interventions have paid off. This is not only because they move schools a lot, but also because these students are the ones that are the most likely to be absent from their *current* school because of contributing factors at home.

Further compounding the problem, the research hasn't always shown that highly mobile students are at a higher risk for lagging behind academically, because in recent years *who* our highly mobile students are has changed. In the beginning days of compulsory education, most of the students who moved around a lot, moved because their parents were upwardly mobile, meaning that one of the student's parents, most often the father, had secured a more highly paid prestigious job somewhere else in the country. This meant that the students who were moving from school to school were generally white, middle class students whose families were moving further and further from the poverty line:

in other words, the students who were most likely to succeed in school anyway. In recent years however, the students who move are generally downwardly mobile, meaning that they are moving because a parent has lost their job, their parent has only temporary work, or the parent is moving somewhere to try and secure a job since there is not a lot of work to be found where they are. The increase in single parent households also contributes to the increase in downwardly mobile families, because these households are more likely to be sensitive to dips in the economy. Further, as we will see when we analyze the subgroups of highly mobile students, these students are more likely to be in great poverty and often come from home situations that are far less than ideal. They are also often English Language Learners and/or students of color. In other words, these are the students that would be “at risk” even if they stayed in one school for their entire K-12 careers. Moving all the time just compounds problems that already exist.

Despite these challenges for the students and teachers and the lack of research on the subject, these students are an important part of our school population and deserve to have an education that fits their social, emotional and academic needs. Fulfilling these needs for highly mobile students falls heavily in the hands of the classroom teacher, and therefore teachers need to be aware of

the research on this population that *is* out there, and what they can do to help these students.

Who are Highly Mobile Students?

Highly mobile students are generally defined as students who have moved 6 or more times throughout their K-12 education, or on average, every two years. For younger students, highly mobile students are defined as students who have moved 2 or more times by the end of third grade. There are a myriad of reasons why students may be highly mobile. They may be moving because their parents got a new and better paying job, for new opportunities in other places, or for less desirable reasons such as loss of a home or foster care.

Whatever the reason for these moves, these highly mobile students tend to have lower academic achievement, with the notable exception of students enrolled in the International Baccalaureate (IB program), which is an international program that was originally implemented in many different countries to make a more seamless transition for children of diplomats. Military children enrolled in Department of Defense schools are often another exception.

Subgroups More Likely to be Highly Mobile

Although the 2000 U.S. Census concluded that 18% of elementary school aged students have moved schools in the past year, there are some groups of students who are more likely than others to be highly mobile. For instance, high poverty

students are more than twice as likely as affluent students to have moved in the past year. Other subgroups within the “Highly Mobile” category include:

- Military Children
- Children of Migrant Workers
- Children who live in “great poverty”
- Homeless Youth
- Children in the foster care system
- Children with families dealing with: substance abuse, domestic violence or emotional stress
- Immigrants
- Runaways
- “Third Culture Kids” or students whose parents were born in the U.S, but who are being raised in another country, such as children of diplomats

Students who belong to any of these subgroups face unique risks. However, some students, such as those living in high poverty, those affected by domestic violence substance abuse, homeless students, and runaways face other affective risks beyond “simply” being highly mobile.

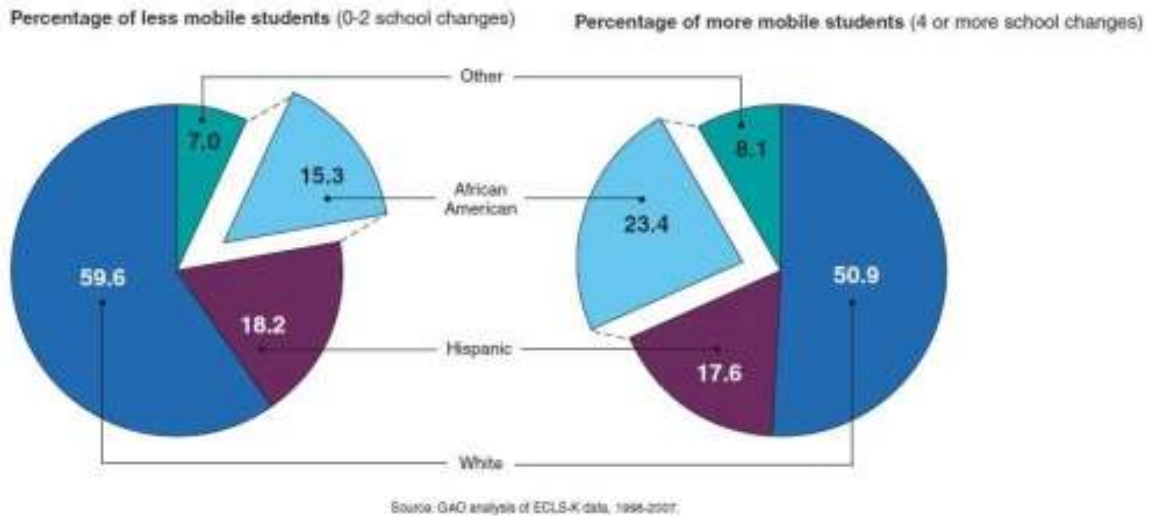
Transient Children and Children of Migrant Workers

Though homeless students can also be transient, and transient students can also be homeless, the two groups do differ in statistics, problems posed for teachers and strategies that will assist them in the Elementary classroom

With teachers today being asked to do so much in and out of the classroom, it is no surprise that these transient students, even more-so than homeless students, sometimes slip through the cracks. For transient students, teachers are pushed to connect with and learn about their new pupils, find the student's academic level, assess if there are learning disabilities or difficulties with which the student may need help, and give individualized instruction all before a student moves to their next school. Teachers are set up to fail in this regard, because students often move too quickly to obtain these services.

While between 10 and 20 percent of the population in the United States moves each year, some portions of the population move more frequently than others, as the chart below shows. While Hispanic students are equally as likely to have moved 0-2 times or 4 or more times, African American students are 8.1% more likely than white students to have moved 4 or more times during their

schooling.



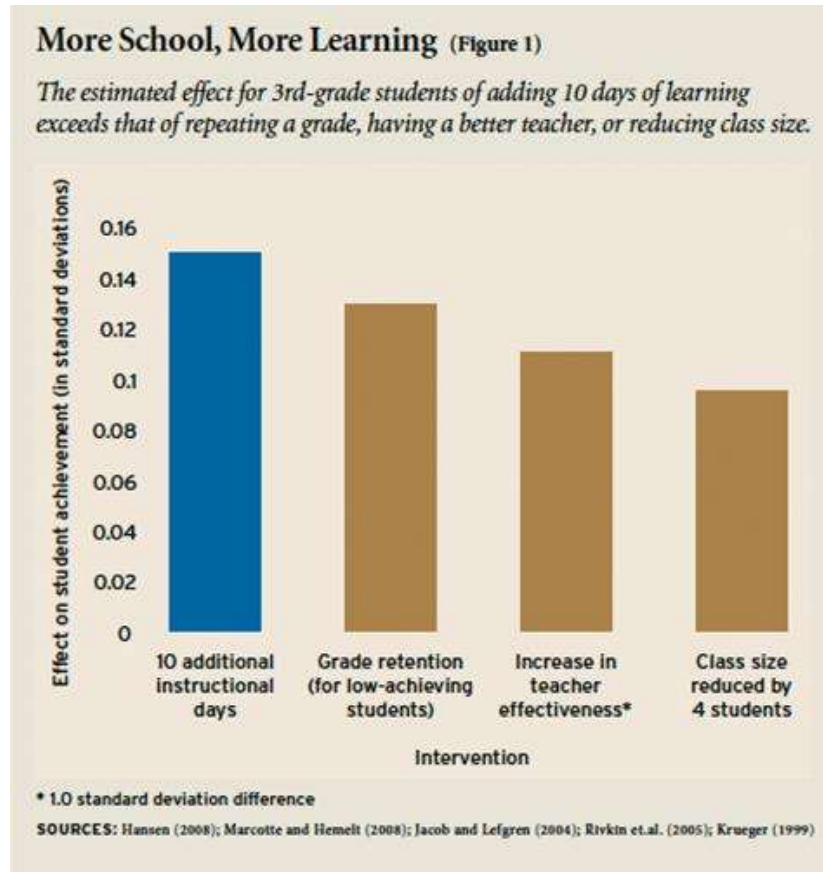
This means that overall, African American students are more likely than White students to suffer from the problems that high mobility brings. This is one hypothesis as to why, as a group, the high school graduation rate for African American students is lower than that of many other ethnic groups in the country.

Some of the problems for highly mobile students

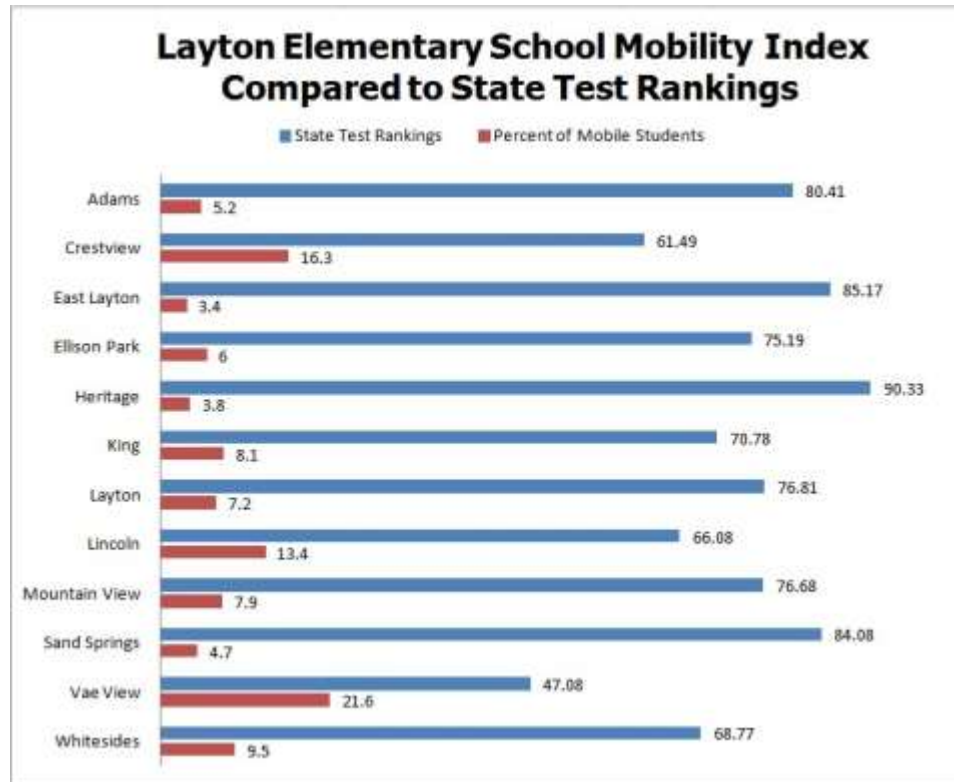
When students move, especially in the middle of the year as transient and migrant children are likely to do, they are highly stressed. They have left friends and family behind and often are downwardly mobile and therefore their standard of living has recently decreased. This change can be similar to mourning or even death for some students; it can take up to 6 months for students who have moved to begin performing to the level they were used to in their old school.

But, even more difficult from the teacher's perspective is that moving is likely to create gaps in a student's knowledge. Students who move in the middle of the year, from one third grade class to another for instance, have often already covered topics that the class is currently covering in their new school. For instance, a 3rd grade classroom in Mt. Angel, Oregon had two students move into it partway through the year, and when the teacher covered fractions in the Mt. Angel classroom, both students had covered fractions in their old school. At first glance, this seems like a positive thing, because students have more time with the material, and are perhaps more likely to master said material than their peers. However, we need to dig deeper in this case. If a 3rd grader covers fractions twice during their 3rd grade year, it means that they missed another equally important math topic during their move. This might not be significant during 3rd grade, but when they reach 4th grade, they will have a gap in their math knowledge that will put them at a disadvantage compared their less transient peers.

In fact, as the next chart shows, just adding 10 extra instructional days to the school year is more effective than retaining students, increasing teacher effectiveness, or reducing class size. Therefore, missing 10 school days, whether from a move or from adjusting to a new school and schedule, can be very detrimental to students.



This is a proven connection; Levine, Wesolowski and Corbett (1996), discovered that the number of times a student has moved is strongly associated with their grades. These students scored lower on state tests and on report cards, and overall were less likely to graduate high school, and more likely to have repeated a grade.



As shown above, we can see this trend of lower test scores the higher the percentage of mobile students in the school. The chart above shows that this trend even remains true within one district in only their elementary schools, and such trends transfer nation-wide and across all grade levels.

Along with the problems that come from moving a lot, such as lower grades and higher stress, many of these students, especially those who are children of migrant workers, face additional problems such as homelessness, poverty, and having to learn English as a second language. These students are also more likely to have emotional and behavioral problems along with academic gaps. Both Piaget and Maslow would say that some of these emotional and

behavioral problems come from the fact that many of the basic needs of these students are not being met, especially when it comes to consistency and security in their lives. It is extremely hard for children to feel secure if they are constantly moving from place to place, having to make new friends, and especially if they aren't always certain where they or their families are going to live. Some of this insecurity and the resulting behavior problems also come simply from moving schools, especially in the middle of the year. If these students are moving to a new classroom with a new teacher, they have to re-learn rules, procedures, norms, names, and the physical layout of the school. Doing that often could make a student act out simply from the stress of relearning all of this information along with the academics that they are being taught.

Strengths of Transient Students

Many of the problems that transient students run into are directly related to the amount that they tend to move around. However, these things also lead to some of their greatest strengths. It is important to know the strengths of these students, because knowing what their strengths are allows the classroom teacher to play to these strengths, and make the transition easier for both themselves and their students.

One common strength that transient students share is the ability to adapt. Because they have moved so often, transient students tend to become confident that they have the ability to accept whatever life throws at them and thrive in those situations rather than just survive. In the classroom, teachers can play up this strength by allowing these students to help their peers accept the small changes in the day that seem to completely disarm the average elementary school student.

Highly mobile students also tend to be very good listeners. Often, they gain this skill from facing loss and separation from all of the moving that they have had in their lives which makes them more compassionate and empathetic towards others struggles. In the classroom, these students make good friends to quieter students and also to other students who really need someone to lean on.

Resiliency and the ability to focus on the present are other wonderful traits of these students. Transient students move often, and therefore have learned how to live in the present and make the most of the time they have in any one place. This is a great trait to have in a school, because it makes them fun and desirable to their peers (if a bit rash). The flip side of these traits is that these students may need a lot of support in planning for the future and goal setting.

What Can the Classroom Teacher do for Transient Students?

Be Welcoming. Any student, especially one who has been to many schools, can tell when they are not wanted, and if the classroom teacher seems distressed to have a new student, the student in turn will be even more distressed about moving to a new classroom.

Teach units consecutively and in a relatively short time. Having an ongoing science project in your classroom is sometimes necessary if your students are watching chicks hatch or observing the life cycle of flowers or trees. However, if it is not necessary for your unit to span a long period of time, try to avoid allowing it to do so, especially if you are at a school that has a high rate of highly mobile students. This will allow students to start and end as many units as possible with you.

Send letters. If a student leaves your class quickly and unexpectedly as transient students tend to do, have you or your class write a letter to them to place in the student's cumulative file to be forwarded with them to their next school. This small act can help students feel more at home and secure in their new school.

Prepare ahead of time for mobile students. No one wants to feel like the "new kid" for the whole time they are in a new space. If you pass out special

nametags at the beginning of the year, make sure to keep a couple aside for new students. If you draw popsicle sticks to call on students, make sure the new student gets one as soon as possible so that they begin feeling like a part of your community as soon as possible

Have Clear Assessment Plans. Transient students are likely to have gaps in their knowledge, and therefore, assessing students before you teach them means that you are more likely to catch these gaps in knowledge before the gaps impede the new learning.

Create “buddies.” If teachers can find appropriate and carefully chosen classroom buddies for new students, especially transient mobile students, these buddies can help new students transfer more easily into the school both academically and socially.

Allow students to share. If the new student is comfortable, allowing him or her to share their experiences from their old school or state can help them integrate better into the classroom, make them feel more valued, and also teach your other students about new places and lifestyles.

What can Principals Do?

Encourage afterschool support. If a principal has advance notice that a new student is joining the school soon, he or she can encourage after-school

directors and coaches to reach out to these students directly to help them feel more welcome, more quickly into the entire school culture.

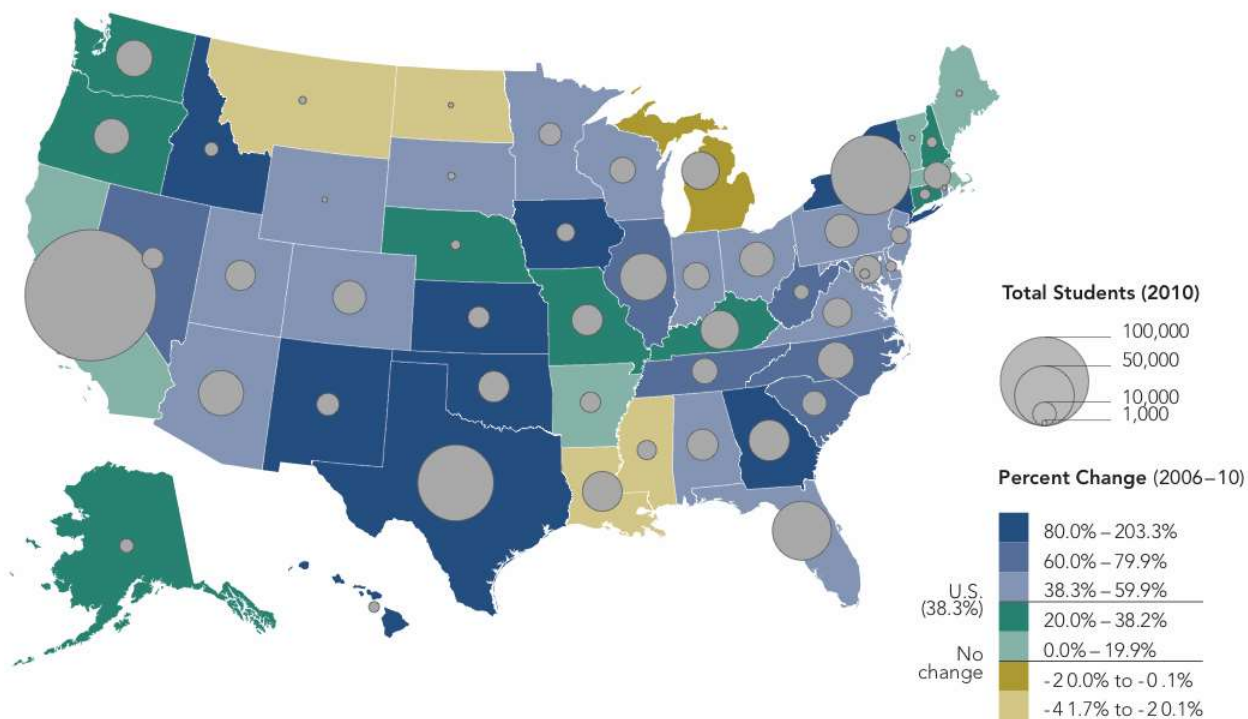
Provide tutoring. An afterschool tutoring program can really assist highly mobile students in catching up to their peers academically, but it is also not a bad idea for all students since many students need a safe place to go after school before their parents come home.

Overall, transient students are in a unique situation from other kinds of students in our schools, because they are moving more often and further than even other kinds of highly mobile students (such as homeless students or students from “great poverty”) but if schools and teachers are willing to understand the needs of this population and be flexible in meeting those needs the payoff can be incredible, both in improvement in behavior of these students and in terms of their academic progress.

Homelessness Among Students

Because of the recession in the United States, there has been an unparalleled increase in homelessness among students in the US, with the total homeless population increasing 38% from the 2006-07 school year to the 2010-11 school year. In some states, the increase has been even more dramatic; for instance, in Texas, the percentage has risen by 125% since 2006. Figure 1 shows the increase in homeless students across the US from 2006 to 2010.

Figure 1
Number, 2010, and Percent Change, 2006–10, of Homeless Students



Who are Homeless Students?

When most people think about “homeless” students or families, they think about students who are living out on the streets or in homeless shelters.

However, homelessness is not limited to those two situations. The National Center for Homeless Education defines homeless students as students who are living either in shelters or unsheltered, but they also extend that definition to students who are living in hotels or motels, and students who are living “doubled up” or with another family, usually family friends or relatives. According to the American Almanac, much of the increase in the homeless population between 2006 and 2010 comes from families who fall into the “doubled up” category as opposed to families living in shelters, motels, or on the streets. Table 1 from The National Center for Homeless Education shows this change.

Table 1

Primary Nighttime Residence (by school year and percent change)					
	2006–07	2007–08	2008–09	2009–10	2006–10 % change
Shelters	161,640	164,982	211,152	179,863	11.3%
Doubled-up	420,995	502,082	606,764	668,024	58.7%
Unsheltered	54,422	50,445	39,678	40,701	-25.2%
Hotels/motels	51,117	56,323	57,579	47,243	-7.6%
Total	679,724	794,617	956,914	939,903	38.3%
Total (without California)	501,710	570,368	668,681	746,107	48.7%

Interestingly, the percent of students living unsheltered or in hotels/motels has actually *decreased* in this time period, probably because of factors related to the recession. First, many of the families who are becoming homeless cannot afford to live long term in even the cheapest hotels or motels, and conversely, since more students are becoming homeless, the Obama Administration has given more funding to shelters, more readily available to those who need them.

To define “Homeless Students” even further and more succinctly, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Subtitle B-Education for Homeless Children and Youth) is a provision of No Child Left Behind and defines homeless students for the sake of protecting their rights and providing funding for schools. The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines homeless students as:

“Who is homeless? (Sec. 725)

The term “homeless children and youth” —

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence ...; and

(B) includes—

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

(ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings ...

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).”

By this definition, many students who we may not normally think of as “homeless,” most notably students awaiting placement in foster care or abandoned in hospitals, qualify as homeless, and therefore should be receiving services. This is important for teachers, administrators, and district staff to know, because knowing all of the definitions of the term “homeless” allows them to better serve those students in their schools who qualify for special services.

Identifying Homeless Students

There are many reasons that it might be difficult to identify students living in a homeless situation. First of all, families and students might be hesitant to tell school staff about their homeless situation because they are embarrassed or ashamed of their situation. Secondly, parents could be afraid that, if people know of their homeless situation, their children could be taken from them. In another situation, “unaccompanied youth” (more colloquially, “runaways”) might not report their homeless status because they are afraid of returning to the

unsafe family environments that they just left. Making it even *more* difficult to identify homeless students is the fact that that many homeless students, especially unaccompanied youths, do not attend schools and don't live in shelters, which makes them very difficult, if not impossible, to identify. However, all of that being said, it is incredibly important to identify homeless students if only to be sure that they are benefitting as fully as possible from the laws in place to protect and help them. In fact, it is written into the laws that schools must work with their homeless liaisons in order to identify these students. So how might schools go about this identification process?

First and foremost, district personnel, especially homeless liaisons, should be in contact with community agencies that interact with the homeless, such as soup kitchens, shelters, public health departments, faith-based organizations, and community action agencies, so that they can help with identification of at-risk students, and also communicate to these students the resources available to them.

Look for strings of absences; sometimes these can be related to homelessness. A good strategy teachers and principals can use in this situation is to work with truancy officers who are more trained to recognize when strings of absences might be related to homelessness. Officers are also helpful because

they may be able to refer these students and families to resources that they need.

In upper elementary, teachers may be able to identify unaccompanied minors (*less common in the elementary grades*) through surveys of peers, questionnaires, or outreach. These techniques can be helpful in giving teachers an idea of which students to watch more closely. However, these techniques will only work if they are done privately and with dignity, as these students do not want to be “called out.”

Avoid using the word “homeless” with students and adults. This word can often make adults think of the stereotypical image of a homeless *adult* rather than a child or youth who is attending school. Asking adults if they know of students living in cars, with relatives, or at motels, or if they know of students who have moved several times in the last year tends to yield better results. As for children, they often don’t think of themselves as “homeless,” so asking them about homeless-ness won’t ring true to them; rather, placing materials that describe the *symptoms* of homelessness at shelters, motels, campsites, or housing projects can yield more positive results, rather than just calling these families “homeless.”

Within the classroom, look for students who appear sleepy, wear the same clothes, are carrying a lot of belongings, hoard food, or talk a lot about moving. These are subtle signs of homelessness that a classroom teacher might pick up on before other people in the school are aware of a problem.

Present your case as just trying to help. Oftentimes parents are grateful because they didn't know that there were services available to keep students in the same school, find them access to food and clothes, and enroll them safely.

Helping Homeless Students within the District/School

Often, teachers think that they can provide everything that their students need; however, in the case of homeless students, this is not the case. Schools and teachers cannot end homelessness; they can, however, ease the burden for their students. Teachers should not be afraid to contact people "in the know," and reach out to experts in homelessness: people such as homeless liaisons (who are often employed by the district to aid teachers in helping homeless students), shelter directors, and Title I staff. In fact, one of the first people a classroom teacher or principal should contact is a shelter director or staff member. If schools are able to establish a good two-way communication between the shelter and their staff, it can go a long way in helping principals keep track of students, as well as helping to provide transportation before and after school, homework

help, and medical care if needed. Shelters can also help to arrange childcare so that older siblings don't feel like they need to miss school in order to care for younger siblings. Title I staff can also be helpful in situations of homelessness by providing resources from the district for things like transportation, child care, school supplies, counseling, and extra instruction for homeless students and families. Even if a school is not Title I qualified, they can apply for special district funding to aid in the cost of some of these programs.

Schools should also work with homeless families to ease enrollment procedures. Most schools require a proof of address, birth certificate, et cetera. However, many homeless families do not have access to, or cannot afford these documents. In order to ease this burden and in order to follow firmly established laws about the right to free education, these procedures may need to be modified.

If a school requires a proof of residency, schools may accept motel receipts or a letter from a shelter as proof of residency. Birth certificates might also be hard for homeless families to come by. In lieu of providing a birth certificate, schools may be able to accept a passport, a bible inscription, a social service form, or a baptismal record as proof of a birth date.

Additionally, homeless families often do not have the funds to provide immunization records. In order to help the families overcome this problem, schools can have parents sign a personal belief exemption, or they could refer students to a local health clinic. If parents cannot provide an emergency card because of lack of phone numbers or medical releases, principals need to know that there is an option for them to get in contact with a juvenile court judge, emergency physician, or social service agency for authorization in case of an emergency.

Schools should reconsider zero-tolerance policies. Homeless children may act out in school because of their stressful family situations, but removing them from schools is not the answer; oftentimes they need and deserve a second chance, in spite of zero-tolerance policies.

Helping Homeless Students in the Classroom

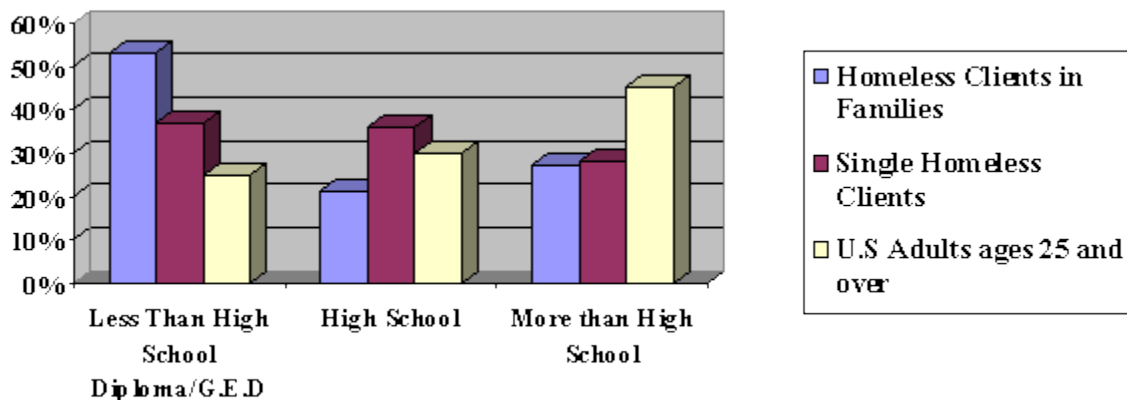
Teachers can help homeless students find access to little things that will make their lives easier. For instance, many districts have resources to allow students a prepaid phone for safety, which is a resource of which many teachers are unaware, not only helps students feel safer, but also can help them fit in. Finding students access to a shower with shampoo and a clean towel (often

available in a school gym) is also something that isn't hard to do, but can really help homeless children not to stand out and also meet their basic needs.

Teachers can also help by being flexible. Sometime students do not have anywhere to work at "home" on homework. Modifying assignments so that students can complete work at school, or sending them home with a clipboard and all the supplies they need to complete the assignment can help this situation, as can dividing up a big assignment into bite sized pieces. Teachers might also want to consider modifying policies for these students. Homeless children might not want to hang up a coat in the classroom because it might be their only one. Letting the student keep the coat on could provide them with a sense of comfort and security.

As the chart below shows, homeless children are the least likely to graduate high school of all of the other homeless populations. Therefore, in order to help them, teachers should make an effort to talk to them about the importance of high school education, and the resources that are there to help them, as early as possible in order to at least begin, even at the elementary level,

to set them up for high school graduation.



Finally, often homeless students are very food insecure, meaning that they are not sure where their next meal is going to come from. Research has shown that food insecure students do worse academically no matter what circumstances have led them to be food insecure. Therefore teachers can help make sure that these students are eating, either by helping the families enroll in free/reduced lunch and breakfast programs or by starting a “backpack” program at their school, where school personnel gather canned and boxed food for these food insecure families and put them into students backpacks on Fridays so that these students know that they will have something to eat over the weekends.

All of these strategies do require a little bit of work and coordination on the teacher’s part, along with a lot of understanding of a student’s unique home situation. However, the pay-off in terms of student’s academic progress and

their feelings of safety and security at home and at school make the effort on the teacher's and the district's part worth it in the long run.

What Can We Conclude From The Research?

Despite the lack of research on the subject of highly mobile students, especially those who are in Elementary Schools, there is still plenty that classroom teachers and school districts can do to support these students throughout their educations both in and out of school.

First and foremost, all of the research says that the biggest thing that a classroom teacher can do for highly mobile students is to truly take an interest in their lives, welcome them into the classroom, and immediately try to make them feel like a part of the community. The research behind this says that students who feel more secure in their schools and homes tend to do better academically in school. And, while there is not a lot that teachers can do to help students feel secure in their homes, it is within their powers to make these students feel welcomed and secured at school.

Beyond making them feel welcomed, there are specific things that teachers and school districts can do to help these students get their basic needs met. These things differ depending on the type of highly mobile student however; many of these methods to make the students feel more secure become clearer when teachers and districts are considering the needs of the individual students in their classrooms. For instance, if a teacher knows that there are

students in their classroom who are going hungry, the logical next step would be to figure out how to get those students food. And, once a teacher or administrator is able to identify the problem for that specific student, they simply need to reach out to the appropriate people in the district to find those resources to help that student.

The most important strategy for helping for highly mobile students is to advocate with and on behalf of them. Teachers should be working with families to develop an action plan to help them and their children receive the services necessary to help the students and families succeed. And, if teachers are able and willing to advocate for their students and families then more and more of these highly mobile students are going to be able to graduate from high school and succeed both academically and in their future careers.

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