

Grigg, Jeffrey. (2014). Student Mobility, Identity, and Attitudes: The Social and Academic Consequences of Changing Schools.

Abstract

Changing schools appears to disrupt the lives of students, but attributing causal effects to mobility is challenging, since students are non-randomly selected into mobility. In this dissertation, I investigate student mobility in multiple ways to address two over-arching questions: 1) Does mobility influence students? 2) If so, how, and can anything be done about it?

I first exploit the variable timing of unscheduled school moves to compare recent and past school movers. Under reasonable assumptions this matching approach accounts for unobserved fixed characteristics that cause mobility. I find no evidence that mobility impacts test scores and small deficits attributable to mobility on indicators that capture dimensions of social integration such as grade point average and attitudes.

Next, I suggest that the uncertain social standing of new students induces *mobility threat*, a situational form of social identity threat. Using experimental data from a district-wide evaluation, I estimate for mobile students the impact of values-affirmation through expressive writing, which has been shown to buffer students from social identity threats. On average, values affirmation does little good for mobile students. Non-experimental analyses show that students who write about topics other than their friends or family suffered apparent academic declines, but it is unclear whether the writing prompt produces this decline or simply reveals social difficulties.

Finally, I examine multiple ways in which students transition to middle school. By comparing students who transition from elementary school to middle school with large and small numbers of their elementary school peers from attached and separate schools, I distinguish between variations in the physical and social dimensions of the “environmental discontinuity” that students experience as they transition to middle school. I find that the social dimension is associated with student outcomes: students who transition in larger cohorts—and thereby preserved more of their existing peer relationships—have more favorable attitudes toward school and fare better on some achievement tests.

Collectively these findings suggest that mobility and school transitions play a small part in the ongoing challenges that some students face, but that being new pales in comparison to the conditions that cause students to move.