

WHO TRANSFERS BEFORE SCHOOL'S OUT?

Highlighting Findings on Student Mobility in St. Louis Schools

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Educators say student mobility is high in St. Louis city schools.

Understanding the causes and outcomes of that movement is the goal of the Saint Louis School Research-Practice Collaborative's (SRPC) first research effort. In a [previous brief](#), we used publicly available figures from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (commonly known as DESE), which showed a 37% median transfer in and out rate across St. Louis City district and charter schools. The SPRC knows, and you in school leadership certainly know, that this churn of students and the resulting disruption to classroom culture presents unique challenges to improving academic outcomes and school climate.

This brief is part of a series that explores student-level data on who, where, and why students transfer schools before the end of a school year. In this analysis, we paint a more detailed picture of students who are more or less likely to switch schools. The findings are meant to be discussed among educators to raise questions and inform future research.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Students who had a higher odds of changing schools mid-year compared to classmates who didn't move were...

- unstably housed
- in high school
- lower income
- receiving special education services
- living in neighborhoods with higher rates of home ownership and college degrees
- living in predominately Black neighborhoods

Students with a lower odds of transferring were...

- English Language Learners

FINDINGS

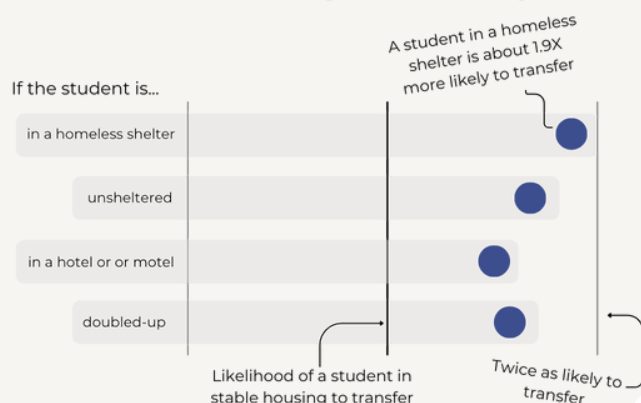
Our analysis of data from 2007–2022 found the following characteristics of St. Louis City students made a student more or less likely to transfer:

- **Housing Stability:** Students with unstable housing were significantly more likely than their stably housed peers to transfer. Also, the transfer odds were nearly two-times higher for students in shelters than housed students, higher than other unstable housing situations, such as doubling up or staying in a hotel.
- **Grade Level:** Odds of transferring were lower for students in 1st through 8th grades. They increase in high school, peaking in 9th and 10th grades.
- **Race:** Black students had a significantly higher chance of transferring schools than white students. Hispanic and Asian students were less likely than white students to move schools.
- **Neighborhood:** Students living in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of Black residents were more likely to transfer.
- **Special Services:** Students receiving special education services were slightly more likely to transfer, while English Language Learners were less likely to transfer.

What's a "student transfer?"

We defined a student transfer as a transfer record of a student moving from one school to another at any point during an academic year from Kindergarten to 12th grade.

The odds of transferring mid-school year



There's variation within types of housing instability. While a higher transfer rate for students with unstable housing may be expected, the extremely high rates of transfers among students who are in shelters, opposed to other unstable housing conditions, may guide intervention design.

Neighborhood demographics are a factor. For students who transferred before the end of a school year, the odds of transferring were higher for students in neighborhoods where more of adults have a college degree or own homes. This may suggest that students with fewer financial resources are more limited in their movement of schools than students in neighborhoods with more homeownership and education.

Comparing St. Louis City to its surrounding counties, we found similar trends. For instance, as a region, students who were Black, male, receive free or reduced-price lunch or unstably housed were more likely to transfer before the end of a school year.

WHERE ARE STUDENTS GOING?

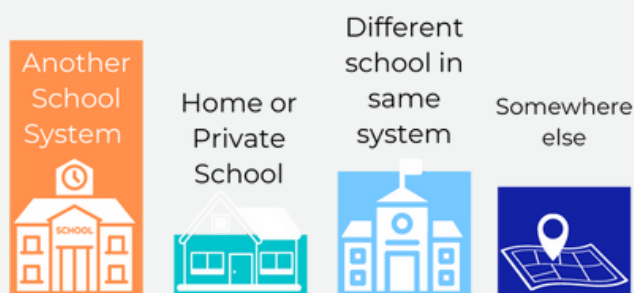
St. Louis City has a higher rate of transferring before the end of a school year than the surrounding region. In the city, 9.6% of students change schools during the year, compared to 6.5% for the surrounding counties.

In St. Louis City, one in 10 students changed schools during the school year. For students who transferred, the majority stayed in public education, with almost half going to another district or charter school. Breaking down where the 9.6% of city students who transferred went:

- To another district or charter: 4.5%
- Within the same district: 2.2%
- To another state or county: 1.9%
- To home or private school: 1.1%

Where St. Louis City transfers went

The breakdown of where the nearly 10% of St. Louis students who transferred in 2022 ended up.



The city and regional transfer figures are much lower than the number we previously shared using public DESE building data. There are a few reasons for that, mostly around what's considered a transfer, and when the school move happens.

For instance, we examined moves happening during the school year, not over the summer. Also, a large number of records couldn't be matched with a school that received the student. This may mean that students were not actually moving from school to school, but were instead absent for a long period and eventually unenrolled and re-enrolled in their original school. Understanding where these students were during that undocumented time and how they differ from mobile students will be important.

WHAT'S NEXT

On the following page, you'll find more context and some action steps developed by our practitioners. Our analysis isn't done. In the upcoming briefs, we'll share different ways of looking at the numbers and add new points, such as where students go and the academic impacts of transferring. Additionally, we will share why students transfer in their own words.

HOW WE DID THE WORK

We combined 15 years of student-level data from DESE for St. Louis City and four area counties with demographic and neighborhood data from the U.S. Census. Our student record-level analysis accounted for whether a student transferred multiple times in an academic year from Kindergarten to 12th grade.

For this brief, we focused our study on:

1. Records of students who transfer out and are documented as enrolled in another school (not marked as same-day or same-school transfers).
2. Transfers occurring during the course of a school year (not summer transfers).

Our data counts the student level record, whereas DESE building-level rates may count the same student coming in and out of a school.

Some students were recorded as transfers but never enrolled in another public or private school. Those records weren't included in this analysis.

More information is available in the [technical report](#).

PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVES

We pulled out two of the key takeaways that SRPC educators identified and went deeper. This section provides the valuable context they supplied and potential action items for school leaders to consider.

Children in shelters have the highest risk of transferring schools during the school year.

A child awoke before dawn in an uncomfortable, unfamiliar bed and is now standing outside, daylight barely showing, waiting for a taxi cab to arrive for a ride to school. It'll be a long journey from this shelter in the suburbs to a school in the city, hopefully concluding in time for the start of the school day.

That's the picture painted by school administrators in charge of helping children who are unstably housed. Kids staying in shelters make up a small percentage of students considered homeless, but also represent those experiencing one of the lowest points in a long journey to housing stability. Family members have likely found themselves in this situation abruptly, or after having exhausted all other options.

Shelters are highly volatile environments and drain residents' energy. They're also likely short term, leaving school leaders with little time to arrange transportation before the family relocates.

Educators say students staying in shelters...

- Stay there is part of a longer episode of homelessness
- Are hard to arrange transportation for before relocating
- Are a small portion of all unhoused students
- Often experience housing instability in December and January
- Experienced a sudden need for shelter as a result of domestic violence
- Seek emergency shelter as a last resort

Some possible way to help students remain in school:

- Dedicated, pre-arranged, transportation from shelters that accept families to city schools, with flexible destinations, depending on a student's school
- More emergency or stable housing for families closer to city schools
- Increased outreach and connection with families at risk during critical points in the year

The likelihood of transferring schools mid-year peaks in 9th and 10th grade, before declining for junior and senior years.

A breakup, a fight, a best friend now attending a different school. Freshman year of high school is a difficult transition to make. If social issues — bullying on social media, neighborhood violence, a disruption in social networks, to name some — arise, it can tank a student's desire to stay in that school environment and prompt a transfer.

If educators can keep a student on track until junior year, then the likelihood of graduation spikes; the finish line is in sight. But before that, building community within, and connection to, a school takes time. And it's easily derailed.

Extracurriculars and engaging courses can motivate a student and build community and a sense of belonging. Having a caring adult in the school can create a feeling of security.

Educators say a number things impact 9th and 10th grade stability:

- Proximity and exposure to violence in home neighborhoods
- Non-academic social pressures, such as dating and social media, can cause students to want to transfer in order to avoid uncomfortable interactions with classmates
- It's hard to connect with incoming eighth graders because they're spread across a large number of middle schools. On the flip side, it's hard for middle schools to orient eighth graders to every high school option.

There are actions that can help students connect with their new high school:

- Existing students and staff visit from high schools to feeder middle schools
- Middle schoolers visiting potential high school options
- Co-designing courses, programs, and extracurriculars with incoming freshman
- Asking first-year students what activities and course they want
- Training all adults in the school to have tools to connect with and help students in crisis

Thank you to our practitioners: Jay Hartman, Leslie Muhammad, Debbie Schmidt, Kari Kraichely, Molly Beck, and Crystal Gale, for sharing their perspectives.

Educators: Have your own insights or questions? Help shape our ongoing work:



How have you defined student transfers for this report?

Transfers refer to students who have indicated a move from one school to another before the end of a school year. Students who transferred between school years (i.e., transferring over the summer) were coded as not transferring. The analysis also excludes students who unenrolled and later returned to the same school, which we call same-school transfers. This is the term used to represent students who were never picked up by another school in our dataset. We don't know why, but they ultimately come back to their old school.

Why are there so many significant results?

Data with as much statistical “power” as this is likely to produce statistically significant differences due to the number of observations included in the study. It is thereby important to examine the practical implication of each significantly associated value and whether a significant but small odds ratio is indicative of meaningful differences.

What about the model fits?

Many of the factors included in statistical models were found to be statistically significant. However, there is a considerable amount of variation left unexplained in these models, meaning there are likely other unobserved factors related to transfers that we cannot presently account for. For example, R² estimates for the models (ranging from 0.028 to 0.085) are relatively small in social science research. Therefore, future research should continue to explore additional factors related to mobility.

Where did you compare the city to?

Along with St. Louis City, we collected data in St. Louis, St. Charles, Jefferson, and Franklin counties. When we say “region,” we’re referring to those four counties, plus St. Louis City.

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Why are the student mobility rates smaller than in the first brief?

In the first report, we looked at DESE's publicly available building-level data. DESE's data included transfer in and outs in the numerator of total enrollment. In this student-level report, we focus only on students who transfer out of a school (not transfer ins); transfers occurring during the school year (not summer transfers); and students who enroll in another school.

Limitations of our analysis

There are numerous limitations that should be considered when examining the data from this brief. First, our analysis did not include any identification of causal relationships. For example, it is not possible to say that being in 9th grade causes one to transfer schools — they are simply associated in a statistically significant way. Second, while we were able to account for discrepancies between building- and student-level data, the way transfer codes were utilized from school-to-school may differ, introducing measurement error into the findings. There is a need to discuss with practitioners what exactly these data represent. For instance, same-school transfers represent records who are shown as a transfer out but not picked up by another school. Practitioners have noted this may be due to students missing school then coming back, but there is no way to tell for sure from the data. The proportion of these same school transfers differs for each LEA.

Findings reviewed by: Dr. Mark Hoglebe at Washington University; Dr. Collin Hitt and researchers at the Saint Louis University PRiME Center; and Dr. Lisa Merrill at the American Institutes for Research.