DESCRIPTIVE OVERVIEW

STUDENT MOBILITY IN SAINT LOUIS

A Shared Challenge for City Schools

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Key Takeaways

National research shows:

- Moving between schools frequently can cause students to fall behind by up to a year's worth of learning.

- Mobility affects the students who leave and the students who stay, negatively impacting all students' ability to learn, classroom engagement, and connection to school.

In Saint Louis City:

- In the 2018-19 school year, a third of Saint Louis City's school population was mobile on average.

- Student mobility is high in Saint Louis City compared to surrounding counties and similar-sized cities, but the city's mobility has been declining over the last 10 years.

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Important terms

Student mobility: When a student changes schools for a reason other than grade promotion (i.e. from elementary to middle school).

Mobility Rate: The percentage of all the students enrolled in the school through one year who have been mobile (i.e. transferred into or out of the school).

$$\frac{Transfers}{Fall\ Enrollment + Additional\ Enrollment}$$

WHY EXPLORE STUDENT MOBILITY IN SAINT LOUIS CITY?

A classroom can be an energetic place for deep learning and engagement. Many classrooms across Saint Louis City, however, experience high rates of student mobility, with all of its associated disruptions to learning and peer relationships. Teachers often end the year with different students than they had at the beginning.

Educators in St. Louis have observed that student mobility is a critical barrier to academic growth.

Student mobility, or when students exit their school and enroll in another one for reasons other than grade level promotion, is a considerable challenge in Saint Louis. This type of moving in the middle of a school year can be disruptive. For the student who leaves, they must navigate new social networks and friends in their new school(s). For remaining students, especially in schools where peers are highly mobile, students must watch their classmates come and go. Mobility can also have significant effects on educators. The high level of student movement through the city's public schools often disrupts learning, strains teachers who must differentiate learning for students, and erodes community both inside and outside school walls.

Educators from Saint Louis Public Schools, KIPP, and Confluence Academies identified student mobility as an important research topic for the Saint Louis Research-Practice Collaborative (SRPC) to analyze. The SRPC seeks to 1) understand why students are changing schools, 2) identify patterns in their movements, and 3) study the impacts of movement on student learning and wellbeing. This information will help foster research-based strategies to decrease rates of student mobility and reduce its harmful impacts on students across the city.

What Challenges are Associated with Student Mobility?

Peer-reviewed research on the impact of student mobility has shown that students may change schools for a number of reasons, some voluntary (e.g., to be closer to one's home), others not (e.g., moving due to eviction from housing). One-time movers may be have little problems keeping up with academics or recovering lost ground, especially if they move to a higher-achieving school. However, students who change schools three or more times before the end of elementary school, on average, are a full academic year behind classmates who do not change schools.[1] Districts with high mobility are also associated with lower average ACT scores and lower high school graduation rates.[2]

> " *It's very difficult to help move the needle for that student if we can't get them to the building.*
>
> *- School Administrator* "

It's also challenging for schools with high rates of mobility to create a sense of belonging and develop the strong student-to-teacher or peer-to-peer relationships necessary for consistent classroom engagement and learning.[3] Students who remain in schools that have high mobility are more likely to experience a low connection to the school community and suffer academically.[4] Teachers in highly mobile schools often feel underprepared and overwhelmed by the constant churn of students in and out of their classroom.[5]

> **The Saint Louis Research-Practice Collaborative (SRPC) is an educator-driven, solutions-focused research partnership between K-12 public education providers and university researchers in Saint Louis. The SRPC will provide applicable, accurate data so school leaders can make informed decisions to improve education. Along the way, the SRPC will be transparent in how it presents its findings and makes recommendations.**

What Do We Know About Student Mobility at the School Level in Saint Louis City?

Saint Louis City schools — SLPS and public charter LEAs — had a median transfer rate during the 2018-19 school year of 37%, with some schools as low as the single digits and others at nearly 100%. For half of schools, between a fifth and half of their student body either withdrew or transferred in after the first day of school.

It's important to note that these figures represent the number of mobile students within the city, not how frequently a student transfers in or out of a school. For that reason, these figures may be an underrepresentation of student mobility in Saint Louis. We also know from existing research that with each move, the negative impacts of mobility on that student's learning, on teachers, the school community, as well as the administrative burden on staff, all increase.

> " As an educator, my goal is to develop kids over the long term, but that growth has to happen as fast as possible because I don't know how long I'm going to have.
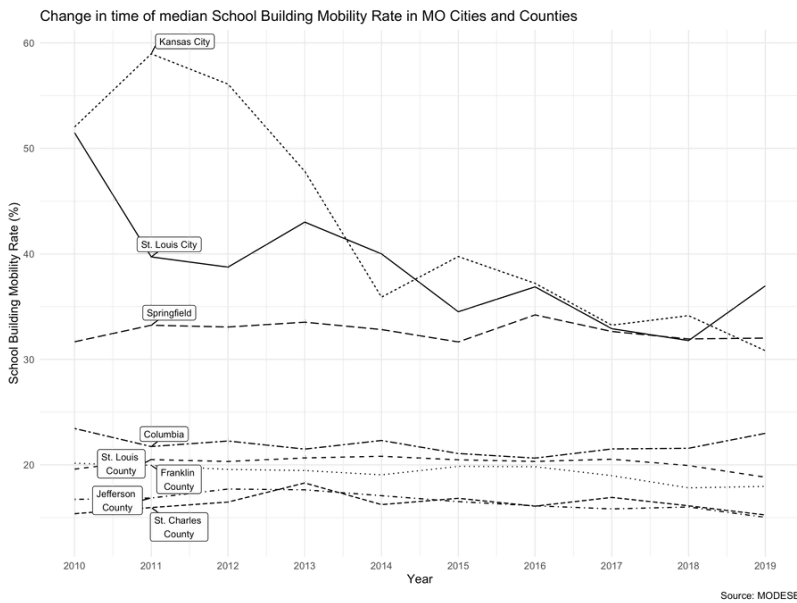> --Elementary School Teacher "

Saint Louis City's overall mobility rate is put into perspective by comparing it to surrounding counties and cities of comparable size (see figure depicting a boxplot below).

Saint Louis City's mobility is high relative to the other areas in Missouri. All schools in Jefferson, St. Charles, and Franklin Counties have mobility rates under 35%. Seventy-five percent of schools in St. Louis County and Columbia have mobility rates under 30%.

Kansas City and Springfield fall closest to Saint Louis City, with median mobility rates of 31 and 32% respectively. However, the overall patterns of mobility in schools still differ significantly from Saint Louis City, indicating there may be unique circumstances in Saint Louis City that impact student movement.
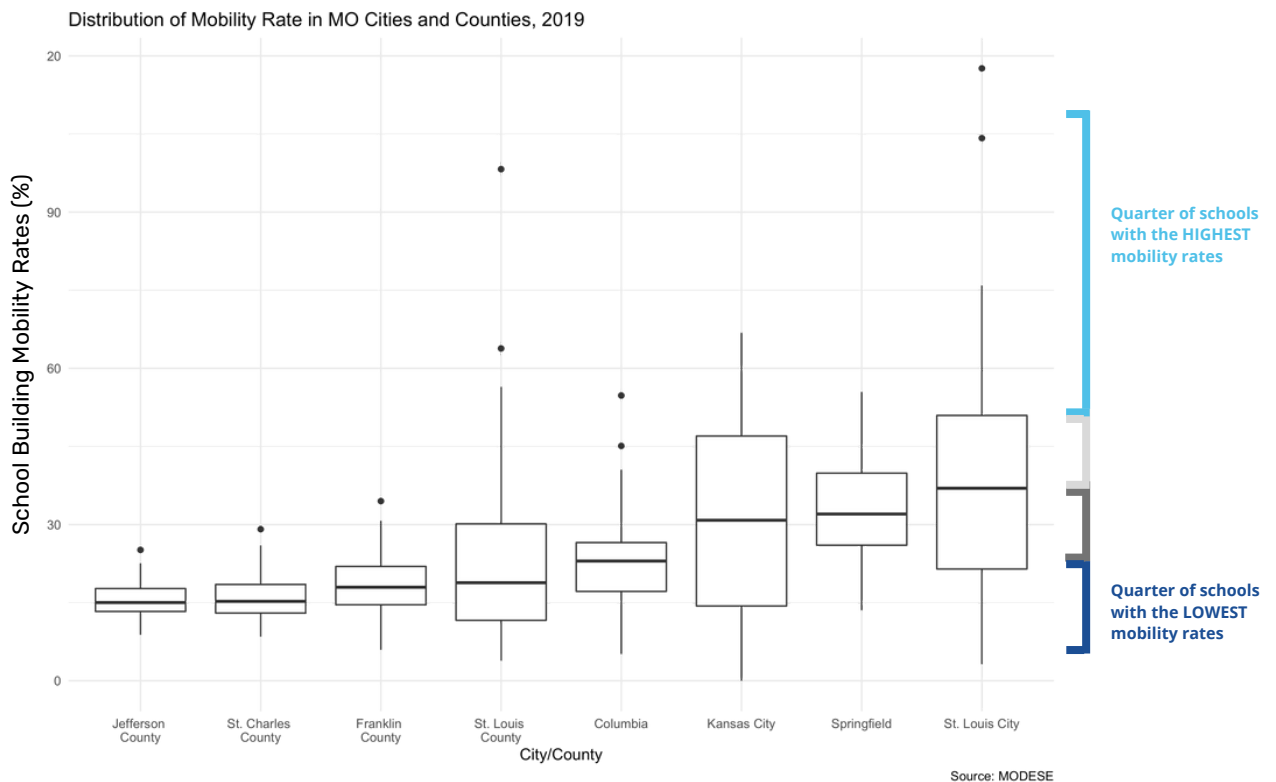
Some schools have mobility rates close to or exceeding 100%. This does not mean that zero students make it to the end of the school year in the same classroom. This may be due to double counting students who transfer multiple times in the same year, or reporting policies, such as the policy to unenroll students who have been absent for 14+ days, even though they come back to school and re-enroll.

Change in time of median School Building Mobility Rate in MO Cities and Counties

Source: MODESE

What Other Factors Are Associated with Mobility?

Two additional factors were analyzed to understand its association with student mobility: attendance and teacher experience. For 2019 data, there was no association between average years of teacher experience and mobility.

The percentage of mobile students in a school, however, was moderately associated with school attendance in the 2019 school year. Schools with lower attendance have higher rates of students transferring into or out of the school. The relationship remained in 2021, though weaker, and returned closer to pre-pandemic levels in 2022. It is unclear whether mobility causes low attendance or if low attendance causes mobility. More research is needed to better understand causes and impacts of mobility in Saint Louis.

Though these rates are high, Saint Louis City's mobility rate has declined over time, dropping from a median rate of 51% in the 2010-11 school year to 37% in 2019 (prior to disruptions caused by COVID-19). Kansas City experienced an even larger decline in median mobility rates, dropping from 52 to 31%. Understanding how and why these declines occurred could inform efforts to mitigate the negative effects of mobility in the future.

There has also been a sharp decline in mobility in St. Louis City since 2019, perhaps due to school disruptions as a result of COVID-19. Additional analysis is needed to understand the long-term effects of the pandemic of mobility.
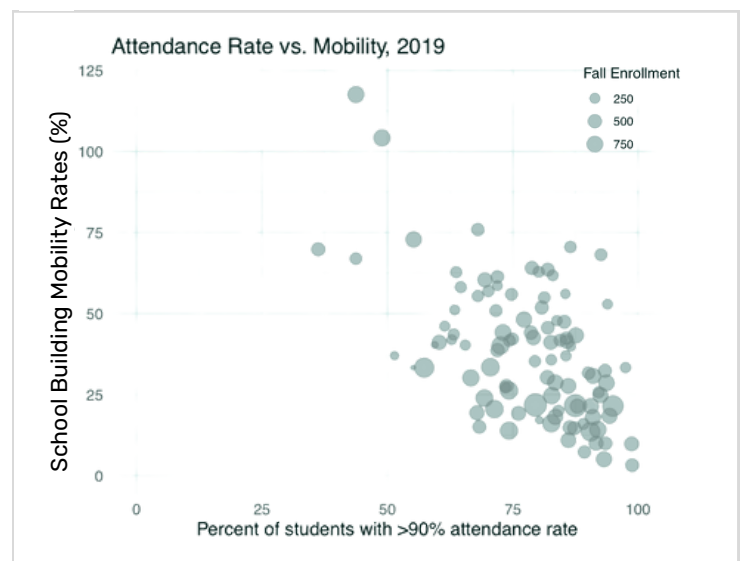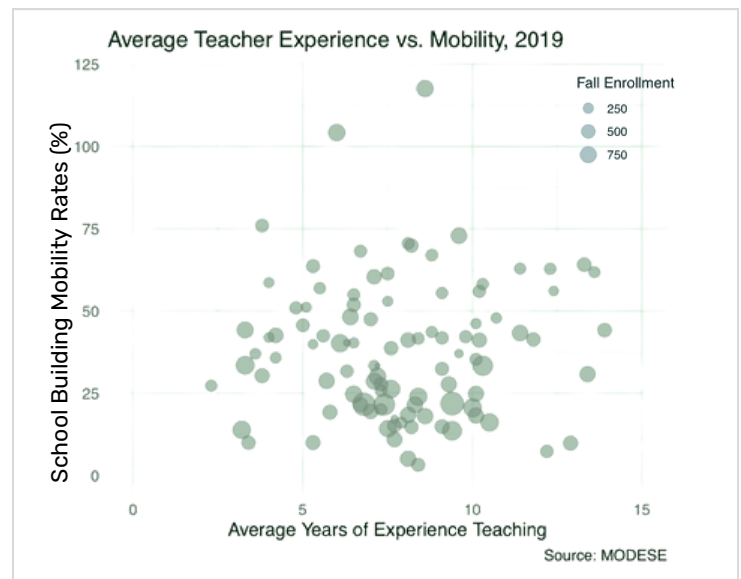
> *It can be traumatizing to lose one of your best friends at school, right? Or it can be traumatizing to always be uprooted or feel like there isn't any sense of stability, especially because school, for some of my students, is the most stable institution they have in their life.*
>
> *-Middle School Teacher*

Source: MODESE

Takeaways & Next Steps

Existing studies suggest that student mobility can be harmful for student learning and developmental outcomes. These negative effects can worsen with every subsequent move. The impact is felt not only by students who leave, but by educators, peers, and schools.

In half of Saint Louis City schools, 20-50% of students either transferred in or out in the 2019 academic year. Understanding the reasons for mobility, the times when students are most mobile, and interventions that can reduce the harmful impact of student mobility is needed. It is also important to explore the characteristics of mobile students to further support schools.

This student mobility project is the SRPC's first step toward supporting schools with evidence to make informed decisions that will better support students and educators.

Additional research will answer questions, such as:

What causes families to move and change schools?

Are there certain grade levels where mobility is most common?

How many and which students in Saint Louis are highly mobile?

What schools and neighborhoods are students moving to and from the most?

What policies, programs, and practices might help schools support highly mobile students?

To stay up to date on the progress of this work, visit stlrpc.org and sign up for our newsletter.

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5. Rumberger, R. (2003). The Causes and Consequences of Student Mobility. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 72(1), 6-21. doi:10.2307/3211287

Data Sources:
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To read more about our methods, read the Technical Brief on our website.