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Student Mobility and Its Implications for Schools' Adequate Yearly Progress

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Correlation and regression analyses were used to investigate the relationship of student mobility (as expressed by the school-level mobility rate) and first through fifth grade reading, language arts, and mathematics achievement for a statewide sample of 1062 elementary schools. Comparison data were analyzed to further investigate the relationship of school-level mobility rate and achievement for schools that met adequate yearly progress (AYP), a mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, and those that did not meet AYP. Findings indicated moderate, negative correlations between mobility rate and achievement across grade levels and subject areas; modest, negative correlations between achievement and mobility when school enrollment size or school poverty status were controlled; and, no significant differences in mobility rate, school size and poverty status for schools that met AYP when compared to schools that did not meet AYP.

***Keywords**: school mobility, NCLB, school poverty, AYP, school size*

Student mobility has been repeatedly defined as changing from one school to another for reasons other than grade promotion (Rumberger, 2003). It has serious implications for students and schools including lower student achievement (Mehana & Reynolds, 2004; Rumberger, Larson, Ream & Palardy, 1999; U. S. Government Accounting Office, GAO, 1994); inconsistent student exposure to educational curriculum (Kerbow, 1996); "social capital" challenges (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Ream, 2005); grade retention and high school dropout risk (Rumberger, 2003; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger et al., 1999); and, curriculum-planning challenges (Audette & Algozzine, 2000; Kerbow, 1996; Kerbow, Azcoitia, & Buell, 2003). As these research examples indicate, student mobility can be analyzed, studied, or dissected from multiple perspectives. However, its impact within the school context and particularly its implications for schools' attainment of adequate yearly progress (AYP) was the focus of this research.

The subject of student mobility quickly rose on the educational scene due to a 1994 U. S. Government Accountability Office report (GAO, 1994) that brought national attention to changing societal demographics and highlighted the negative implications of frequent school change on the academic progress for elementary school children. While the GAO Report of 1994 yielded landmark findings, educational focus would be eclipsed some years later by the passage of *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB, 2002), an act that guaranteed that all students would be academically proficient by the 2014 school year (Owens & Sunderman, 2006; NCLB, 2002). This guarantee that *all* students would be academically proficient has had significant ramifications for public schools. As measured by successful demonstration of AYP, this guarantee has recharged the debate about the seeming shift in educational emphasis from instruction to test performance (Amrein & Berliner, 2003; Paris & Urdan, 2000; Yeh, 2005) and it has raised questions about fairness and/or equity when AYP is considered from the context of schools that are unduly confronted with high rates of student mobility and poverty (Heck, 2006).

Adequate yearly progress is defined by each state's education agency and must meet five parameters set by No Child Left Behind. AYP must (a) set the same high academic standards for all students; (b) be statistically valid and reliable; (c) result in continuous and substantial achievement for all students; (d) measure academic progress primarily by academic

assessments; and, (e) include separate, academic achievement plans for various student groups identified by the Act (NCLB, 2002). AYP is based on performance indicators that include academic achievement (measured by success on criterion-based achievement tests), school attendance and student test participation (Owens & Sunderman, 2006). In addition, student subgroups such as English Language Learners (ELLs), economically disadvantaged, students with disabilities, and racially and ethnically diverse student groups, must demonstrate academic proficiency in order for schools to meet AYP goals (GAO, 2007). For Title I schools, consistent failure to meet this standard could bring one of two outcomes. First, schools that fail to make AYP for four consecutive years are placed on a *corrective plan.* Second, schools that fail to make AYP for six consecutive years face a *restructuring plan* that may include dismantling the school or taking over the school by the state educational agency (GAO, 2007).

Schools that have high percentages of poor children and receive funding under Title I, Part A of No Child Left Behind, are denoted as Title I schools (GAO, 2007). Title I, Part A is the short name for "Improving Basic Programs Operated by Local Educational Agencies." According to the Department of Education, Title I, Part A

> provides financial assistance through SEAs (State Education Agencies) to LEAs (Local Education Agencies) and public schools with high numbers or percentages of poor children to help ensure that all children, including those at-risk, become proficient and that the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students and other students ends. (U. S. Department of Education, 2006, section 4, number 1).

In September 2007, the U. S. Government Accountability Office released a report detailing the status of Title I schools that failed to make AYP. Findings from the report revealed a substantial increase in the number of Title I schools that fell in the corrective or restructuring plan status (GAO, 2007). From the 2005-06 to the 2006-07 school year, the number of schools that fell into corrective action or restructuring status rose from 2790 in the 2005-06 school year to 4500 in the 2006-07 school year (GAO, 2007). Along with consistent school attendance and safety in the school environment, two-thirds of principals surveyed cited student mobility as one reason for the significant rise in schools that qualified for corrective action status (GAO, 2007). In other words, mobility was considered a threat to educational achievement and the attainment of AYP.

Three studies frame the concern that is raised with student mobility and its potential threat to AYP attainment (Audette & Algozzine, 2000; Kerbow, 1996; Rhodes, 2005). Audette and Algozzine (2000), using schools as the unit of analysis, found negative relationships between mobility and achievement. Because of issues like poverty, however, the strength of these relationships could not be clearly determined. Kerbow (1996) noted the negative impact of student mobility on the fluid delivery of curriculum in the classroom. At that time, NCLB had not been authorized and the implication to schools' AYP attainment because of student mobility's disruption to curriculum delivery could not be realized. One particular study, (Rhodes, 2005), analyzed the potential of student mobility to influence negative school progress relative to AYP under No Child Left Behind. While Rhodes addressed student mobility and its unique relationship to AYP attainment, this investigation was limited to primarily urban schools.

In a study that focused on school mobility from a school-level perspective, Audette and Algozzine (2000) compared schools containing high numbers of within-district transfer students with those that had low numbers of within-district transfer students. Study results indicated moderate to high negative correlations between reading, math, and language achievement for schools with high numbers of within-district transfers. Highly mobile schools were characterized as having an enormous proportion of single-parent headed households, increased incidence of educational disabilities, and a lack of student preparedness for grade promotion (Audette & Algozzine, 2000). Student issues related to poverty, ethnicity, and social class were confounded with student mobility in this study.

Kerbow (1996) was among the first to study student mobility and its impact on schools. Kerbow warned that the planning and delivery of curriculum could not be based on assumptions of a stable student population. Accurate conclusions about the best approaches to curriculum and instruction in local schools require one to consider the impact of student mobility. Kerbow suggested that to address curriculum and instruction needs, schools that serve highly mobile student populations must include fast-cycled instruction and curriculum delivery, and this fast-cycled instruction should be sensitive to changing student needs and changing student demographics. Because schools that predominantly serve highly mobile student populations may face unique obstacles to curriculum planning and delivery of instruction, the argument can be made that the benchmarks required by the *No Child Left Behind Act* need to be more attentive to the obstacles that these schools face.

Specific to mobility and implications for AYP, Rhodes (2005) used predictive discriminant analysis to investigate the ability of four variables—(a)school mobility, (b) ethnicity, (c) school size, and (d)socioeconomic status, (SES)—to predict AYP rankings for 506 elementary and secondary schools, from eight urban Ohio school districts. AYP rankings consisted of the following ranges: Academic Emergency, Academic Watch, Continuous Improvement, Effective, and Excellent. Rhodes (2005) found that mobility helped to predict the following three AYP rankings over 50% of the time: (a) Academic Emergency, (b) Academic Watch, and (c) Excellent. Study findings also indicated that highly mobile, poor, and predominantly non-White schools were twice as likely to be rated in the two lowest tiers of AYP rankings (Academic Watch and Academic Emergency).

While these findings were consistent with perceptions by many in the educational arena (e.g., GAO, 2007), there were several study limitations that yielded implications for future research. First, Rhodes (2005) questioned the representative context of the study's sample that included only urban school districts. As a result, the sample did not accurately reflect the overall population relative to its ethnicity, SES, and school size. Second, Rhodes used only "AYP ranking" as the dependent variable. Other AYP predictor variables, such as achievement scores and grade level academic performance, were not used to determine the role of mobility in predicting a school's annual yearly progress. Finally, Rhodes noted the inability to generalize study results because of the definition that was used for mobility. The definition of "mobility rate" used in the Rhodes study equated to the number of students enrolled less than fifty percent of the school year. This definition was not consistent with the definition of mobility most commonly used in other research. For example, Ligons and Paredes (1992) reported that the most commonly used definition of mobility rate is the proportion of students who move and have a different school assignment within the school year. This definition is clarified later in this article as a part of the description of mobility rate that was used in the present study.

No Child Left Behind sought to increase educational accountability (NCLB, 2002). However, it has been argued that it has unfairly penalized some schools (GAO, 2007; Owens& Sunderman, 2006). Most often, factors external to the school, such as residential housing changes, environmental safety, and the concentration of low SES families, have been cited as reasons why schools fail to make AYP (GAO, 2007). These factors are also involved in populations with high school mobility (Minneapolis Family Housing Fund, 1998). The current study examined the relationship of mobility and criterion-referenced student achievement by using a common definition of "mobility rate", by using the school as the unit of analysis, and by assessing achievement using a criterion-referenced measure of student achievement as well as AYP attainment. Because a common measure of "mobility rate" was used, rather than using Rhodes (2005) definition, this study was designed to enhance generalization of results to current educational practice. The definition of mobility used in Rhodes, that is, the number of students enrolled during less than fifty percent of the school year, has limited utility in making comparisons to other research. In addition, this investigation had sufficient power to use school as the unit of analysis because the participating schools were based on a statewide sample of all schools meeting the criteria as noted in the methods.

This investigation had three research goals. First, it explored the relationship between

mobility and three subject areas from the state's criterion-referenced academic competency test for each grade level (reading, language, and math in grades one through five). Second, this study analyzed the relationships between mobility and achievement after controlling for school poverty status and school size. This was done in an effort to overcome prior research about mobility that has been confounded by the relationship of mobility with poverty and school size (Temple & Reynolds, 1999; Wright, 1999). Third, comparisons were made between schools that met AYP standards and those that did not meet AYP standards to examine relationships to mobility rate, school poverty status and school size.

METHOD

Research Design

The first aim of this research was addressed using correlation analyses to ascertain the relationships between mobility and achievement. For the second aim of this research, regression analyses were used to determine the extent to which mobility contributed to variance in achievement after controlling for school size and poverty status of the school. Prior to these analyses, bivariate correlations were calculated to determine the relationships of mobility rate with both school size and poverty status. The third aim of this study was to compare schools that met AYP and those that did not meet AYP, and this was addressed with descriptive analyses, simple *t*-tests and correlation analyses.

Participants

Participants included all of the elementary schools from a southeastern state. These schools were inclusive of Title I and non-Title I schools; urban and suburban schools; and, schools that represented varying sizes, relative to student enrollment, and all regions of the state. Schools were removed from the dataset if they were not kindergarten through fifth grade elementary schools. As such, psychoeducational centers and schools with a limited range of grade levels (e.g., kindergarten through first, third through fifth grades, etc.) were removed from the study (n = 102). Final data analyses were based on 1062 schools.

Instruments

School level data on school size, student mobility rate and results of criterion-referenced test results were made available by a state educational agency. The state's criterion-referenced academic competency test, to be referred to as ACT (academic competency test), is the criterion-referenced instrument that was used to assess reading, language arts, and math performance by grade level for each school. This test was designed to help determine AYP, a function prescribed by No Child Left Behind.

The ACT assesses reading, English/language arts, math, social studies, and science curriculum standards. As a result of differences in test content across grade levels, data analyses must be conducted separately for each grade level. For the purpose of this study, only the reading, language, and math data were analyzed since they are the only areas consistently assessed by the ACT in all five grade levels and are key academic areas in determining schools' progress toward adequate yearly progress.

As referenced in the student mobility literature, the mobility rate is defined as the proportion of students who move and have a different school assignment within the year (Ligon & Paredes, 1992). Specific to the definition used by the state educational agency, the mobility rate in this present study was defined as the count of students entering or leaving a school after September 1 of a given school year, divided by the total number of students enrolled in that school during the school year. Therefore, mobility rate was calculated for the school as a whole. Grade-level mobility rate was unavailable.

RESULTS

Pearson product moment correlations, regression analyses, and simple *t*-tests were used to explore the relationship between school level mobility rate and grade level, ACT: reading, English/language, and math achievement scores.

Research Question One: What is the Relationship between Mobility and Achievement by Subject Area and Grade Level?

Correlations between school mobility and reading achievement for each grade level ranged from $r = -.54$ ($p < .001$) to $r = -.61$ ($p < .001$). Similar findings were observed for the relationships of school mobility with both language arts and math achievement. Correlations between school mobility and language arts achievement ranged from $r = -.46$ ($p < .001$) to $r = -.55$ ($p < .001$). Correlations between school mobility and math achievement ranged from $r = -.50$ ($p < .001$) to $r = -.59$ ($p < 001$). (See Table 1 for additional details).

Table 1

Pearson Correlations of School Level Mobility Rate and ACT: Reading, Language Arts and Math Mean Scale Achievement Score by Grade Level

	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Reading + Mobility	-.541***	-.611***	-.608***	-.609***	-.579***
Language Arts + Mobility	-.462***	-.521***	-.553***	-.544***	-.547***
Math + Mobility	-.501***	-.567***	-.594***	-.537***	-.517***

Note. * $p = .05$; ** $p = .01$; *** $p = .001$.

Research Question Two: What is the Relationship of Mobility and Achievement when Controlling for School Poverty and School Size?

Bivariate correlations were conducted for mobility rate with school size (defined as student enrollment) and poverty status. The correlation between mobility rate and school size was not significant ($r = -.056$, $p = .069$). The correlation between mobility rate and school poverty status was significant ($r = -.434$, $p < 001$). Next, the relationships between mobility rate and ACT: reading, language arts and math achievement in grades one through five were analyzed when school size and school poverty status were controlled. When school size and poverty status of the school were controlled, the relationship between mobility rate and ACT: reading, language arts and math achievement was significant at the $p < .001$ level across all five grade levels.

R-square change values (after controlling for school size and poverty) indicated that mobility rate accounted for a modest, but significant amount of variation in achievement scores across all five grade levels. For example, for the third grade, school size accounted for 2.4% of variation in reading performance, and school poverty status accounted for an additional 29.5%, and finally, mobility rate accounted for another16.4%. As another example, for fifth grade, school size accounted for 4.4% of variation in math, school poverty status for an additional 25.8%, and finally, mobility rate accounted for another 10.1%. (See Table 2 for the details).

Table 2

Grade Level Regression Analyses of Mobility Rate and Reading, Language Arts, and Math Achievement Controlling for School Size and Title I Status

Grade Level	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Reading					
School Size	.011*	.022*	.024*	.043	.036
Title I Status	.251*	.319*	.295*	.315	.320
Mobility	.125*	.159*	.164*	.155*	.130*
English					
School Size	.006*	.020*	.032*	.038*	.014*
Title I Status	.203*	.252*	.276*	.260*	.268*
Mobility	.085*	.109*	.125*	.121*	.124*
Math					
School Size	.021*	.034*	.035*	.067*	.044*
Title I Status	.269*	.307*	.293*	.257*	.258*
Mobility	.089*	.124*	.151*	.114*	.101*

Note. Statistics are reported in R^2 change values; "*" $p < .05$.

Research Question Three: What Differences are there Between AYP and Non-AYP schools Relative to Mobility Rate, Poverty Level and School Size?

The differences between AYP and non-AYP schools relative to mobility rate, poverty status and school size were analyzed via t-tests and simple correlation analyses. In addition, correlation analyses were used to highlight the relationship between mobility rate and achievement for schools that met AYP and for schools that did not meet AYP. Prior to conducting these analyses, however, descriptive analyses were conducted to characterize schools that met adequate yearly progress and schools that did not. Notably, the number of schools in the AYP group was substantially greater than the number of schools in the non-AYP group.

Out of the 1062 elementary schools analyzed, 971 schools met AYP. Ninety-one (91) schools did not. Seven hundred and seventeen (717) schools were designated as high- poverty schools (Title I); 345 schools were not. From schools that met AYP, 633 schools were Title I schools; 338 schools were not. Out of the schools that did not meet AYP, eighty-four (84) schools were Title I; seven (7) schools were not.

According to mobility rate, schools that met AYP had a lower rate ($M = .23$, $SD = .09$) than schools that did not meet AYP ($M = .28$, $SD = .08$). However, the difference between these two means was not significant ($F = 2.270$, $p = .132$). Mobility rate and school poverty were more highly correlated in schools that met AYP ($r = -.429$, $p < .001$) than in schools that did not meet AYP ($r = -.225$, $p = .032$). Similarly, mobility rate and school size were statistically correlated in schools that met AYP ($r = -.068$, $p = .034$). The correlation between mobility rate and school size in schools that did not meet AYP was not significant ($r = .036$, $p = .736$).

Moderate, negative correlations were observed between mobility rate and the state's criterion-referenced academic competency test: reading, language arts, and math achievement for schools that met AYP. These correlations were all significant (Chronbach's alpha level (α) =.01) as shown in Table 3. For schools that did not meet AYP, correlations between mobility rate and achievement were lower across all subject areas and grade levels. Significance ($\alpha = .05$) was found in the majority of subject areas and grade levels. First- and fourth-grade data analyses revealed the greatest amount of variability for significance between mobility and achievement. (See Table 4 for additional details).

Table 3

Pearson Correlations of School Level Mobility Rate and ACT: Reading, Language Arts, and Math Mean Scale Achievement Scores by Grade Level for AYP Schools

	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Reading + Mobility	-.544**	-.617**	-.612**	-.618**	-.583**
Language Arts + Mobility	-.452**	-.518**	-.551**	-.547**	-.539**
Math + Mobility	-.498**	-.567**	-.595**	-.540**	-.514**

Note. * p =.05; ** p = .01; *** p = .001.

Table 4

Pearson Correlations of School Level Mobility Rate and ACT: Reading, Language Arts and Math Mean Scale Achievement Scores by Grade Level for Non-AYP Schools

	First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade
Reading + Mobility	-.245*	-.300*	-.343*	-.216*	-.287**
Language Arts + Mobility	-.235*	-.243**	-.297**	-.176	-.370**
Math + Mobility	-.198	-.272**	-.334**	-.167	-.242*

Note. * p =.05; ** p = .01; *** p = .001.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the relationship between student mobility and AYP attainment. In analyses of this relationship, several key areas were targeted: student achievement, school size (student enrollment), and poverty. Perhaps the most important finding was the consistent moderate, negative correlations between mobility rate and schools' average, grade level, achievement test scores across all elementary grades tested and in the three subject areas analyzed: reading, language arts and math. While these findings were consistent with the negative relationship between mobility and achievement found in past studies (Audette & Algozzine, 2000; Chaika, 1999; Mehana & Reynolds, 2004), they are important because the achievement measures are the same ones used by the state to determine whether schools attain AYP. These findings differed from previous research because this investigation used a substantially larger sample size, including more grade levels than prior research. In addition, this investigation used schools as the unit of analysis rather than individual students (Engec, 2006; Offenberg, 2004) and expanded geographic areas to include all urban, suburban and rural regions of a state (Audette & Algozzine, 2000; Heinlein & Shinn, 2000; Rhodes, 2005). This research utilized a larger number of schools than prior research, including 1062 elementary schools, housing first through fifth grades and encompassing all urban, suburban, and rural areas from one southeastern state.

Reading was the academic area that was most negatively correlated with school mobility. The negative correlation between mobility rate and reading achievement was observed for each grade level (i.e., grades 1–5), when controlling for school size and SES, and when comparing schools that did and did not attain AYP status. The observed relationship between reading achievement and school mobility is particularly important because of the role that reading plays

in determining the success and failure of schools and their students. For schools, reading achievement is one of the performance indicators used to determine AYP (Owens & Sunderman, 2006). Since reading is such a critical area, continued research is needed to more closely analyze the type of reading instruction that is most effective with highly mobile school populations or in schools where high mobility rate is an issue.

It was challenging to examine the relationship between mobility and AYP status because the number of schools that made AYP was substantially larger ($n = 971$) than the number of schools that did not make AYP ($n = 91$). The hypothesis that there would be a significant difference in mobility rate between schools that did and those that did not attain AYP was not confirmed. However, there were differences in the relationship between achievement and mobility for AYP and non-AYP schools. Schools that made AYP had higher and more significant negative relationships between mobility and achievement than schools that did not make AYP. However, the lower correlations for non-AYP schools occurred in grade levels that do not determine AYP attainment (i.e., grades 1 and 4). In grade levels that are critical in determining AYP attainment (i.e., grades 3 and 5), higher and significant correlations between achievement and mobility were found. These findings suggest that more attention should be given to the enrollment and attendance patterns in elementary schools, and that differentiated interventions may be needed to support student achievement in key subject areas (i.e., reading, language arts, and math) for elementary schools with high mobility rates.

While the findings suggest the potential importance of mobility in achievement for schools that did not make AYP, it is important to understand why the negative correlations between achievement and mobility were generally lower in schools that *did not* make AYP. When data were sorted by schools that made AYP and those that did not make AYP, the correlation between school mobility rate and math achievement was not significant across all grade levels for schools that did not make AYP. Two hypotheses may help explain this finding and underscore the need for further research. First, AYP is not solely the function of test scores (Owens & Sunderman, 2006). Schools' non-AYP status may be a function of non-academic performance indicators such as performance of special student groups, test performance, and so forth. These factors were not studied in this research. Second, the number of schools that did not make AYP was substantially smaller than those that did make AYP. The unequal sample size between groups may have influenced the statistical analyses.

This study differed from previous investigations by using schools as the unit of analysis rather than students (Audette & Algozzine, 2000; Engec, 2006). Nonetheless, results confirmed prior moderate correlations between mobility rate and achievement that have been found in prior research using simple correlations. In using simple correlations; however, contributing factors that may affect the relationships between variables are often times ignored. In this study, two factors were controlled: (a) poverty status of the school and (b) total students enrolled (school size), and these analyses revealed significant relationships between mobility and achievement even after controlling for poverty and school size. This further confirms the potential importance of mobility, particularly given the broad sample representing all elementary schools from one state.

CONCLUSION

This study produced several key research findings. First, school level mobility had negative implications for student achievement. Second, school size did not play a prominent role in school achievement or school mobility. Third, above and beyond the relationship between poverty and student enrollment size, school mobility had a negative impact on achievement. Finally, in schools that did not make AYP, grade levels most affected by AYP requirements had stronger relationships between mobility and achievement. While these findings are deemed important in understanding the role of student mobility, study limitations also exist and should be addressed in future research. One particular limitation is that grade-level mobility data were

not available to allow for examination of relationships between grade-level achievement and rate of mobility for particular grade levels. This also prevented more specific examination of other questions pertinent to mobility at specific grade levels. Future grade-level mobility data may provide for more specific understanding of mobility and its impact on academic performance.

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