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### THREE COLUMNBREAKERS

### TRANSIENT STUDENTS

City School's  
revolving door

Moving has consequences for all

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ST. ALBANS CITY — Eighty-seven eighth graders will graduate from St. Albans City School next month, but only 38 of them will have attended the school since kindergarten.

Students arrive and depart the school nearly every week. It isn't unusual to have five to 10 new students arrive in a single week, said home and school coordinator Mark Hoban.

That type of change is a challenge for everyone, but national data show it hits students hardest. Students who frequently change schools have higher drop out rates, lower levels of academic achievement and more behavioral problems, according to national studies.

This holds true regardless of family income levels, a study by the Government Accounting Office (GAO) showed. Students from poor families who had relocated were more likely to be behind their peers academically than poor students who hadn't moved. The more moves, the more likely the student was to be behind. This was true for middle class students as well.

Students who had moved more than twice were two-and-a-half times as likely to repeat a grade as non-movers, the GAO found.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that if a child moves from school to school in a school year that child isn't going to do well," said Vermont Secretary of Human Services Doug Racine.

"Any time you interrupt a kid's education it costs them about four to five months progress," said Mike Mulcahy of the Vermont Agency of Education.

National research has shown that long-term relationships between students and teachers improve student learning, with the greatest gains among poor children.

"These kids that are moving are moving a lot," said Hoban. "These students have no opportunity to build relationships with teachers and students. They really become hard to reach."

For children from one family, City School was their fourth school this year. One of those students was placed in the Grade 1-3 team in which Stacie Rouleau teaches. "Academically, he's very spotty," Rouleau said of that student.

"It's hard to learn to read when you're uprooted all the time," she added.

"These are little human beings who haven't set roots anywhere," said middle school teacher Peter Deslauriers.

### Loss of balance

The movement of students in and out of classrooms upsets the balance teachers and administrators strive to create when students are placed in a particular class. "I think we do a really good job of trying to make placement equal and fair," said Rouleau. Classes are balanced across a range of abilities and needs.

At City School, classes stay together for three years as part of multi-grade teams. Over the two years they've been with Rouleau's team, seven of the roughly 20 students in the third grade have changed.

One third-grade student arrived in Rouleau's team at the beginning of the year without records. The special educator assigned to the team spent two months doing tests to determine the child's needs and writing an individual education plan (IEP). "She moved before the IEP was complete," said Rouleau.

"It's a lot of resources going into kids who aren't staying," said Rouleau.

City School principal Joan Cavallo speaks often of what it is like for educators to begin making progress with a student only to lose the student to a new school. "You look at a kid and you're like, 'We had so little time,'" she said.

The movement can also be hard on the children left behind. The girl who moved two months into the school year left behind a new friend who hadn't quite meshed with the other students in her class. "She got a taste of what it was like to have a best friend in class and she was gone," said Rouleau.

Once in middle school, it can be difficult for new students to form friendships at all, said Deslauriers, who teaches on a seventh and eighth grade team. "It's hard to get into a group at this age," he said.

Frequent movers are more likely to have behavioral problems. Part of the issue is that students are arriving in a new classroom in which they're unfamiliar with rules and expectations. "It's like moving the kid to another family," said Deslauriers.

Expected behavior is generally taught explicitly at the beginning of the year, but that instruction tapers off as students learn the rules, explained Deslauriers. By mid-year those rules and expectations may have become largely unspoken and thus harder for new students to learn.

### Frequent movers

Most of the moving students are not coming from out of state. Instead they're moving between Swanton, Alburgh, Berkshire, the city and sometimes Burlington, said Hoban.

When Sen. Don Collins, D-Franklin County was serving on the Swanton School Board he asked for data about where students were moving to and from. According to Collins, the students there were also moving within a 20-mile radius, including to St. Albans City.

Grand Isle Superintendent Robert Phillips said the Alburgh school system has more than a dozen families that move back and forth between the city and Alburgh. Housing in Alburgh is often seasonal, with rents rising during the summer and falling in the winter. Families may be moving to Alburgh in the winter months to take advantage of the lower rents, he suggested.

Campgrounds are another possibility. "With economic instability there are families that stay in campgrounds for the summer," said Phillips. Those families often stay until October then depart.

For Alburgh, the movement of students in and out can have a large impact on the school's budget, especially high school tuition.

Vermont Secretary of Education Armando Vilaseca agreed that for small schools high school tuition could be a challenge. If a school like Alburgh budgets for 40 high school students and then has 50, "you still have to pay for the 50 and the only place you can get the money is the K-8 school. That puts a lot of pressure on the K-8 schools," he said.

Schools are also legally obligated to follow IEPs written at the student's previous school, which can create unanticipated expenses, explained Phillips.

The other area in which mobile students have an impact is testing. Under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) schools are held responsible for the performance of their students on statewide-standardized tests.

This year Deslaurier's team had five eighth graders it hadn't had in seventh grade. "They don't have the skills I deem necessary to do well on that test," he said. Yet, the teachers and the school are held responsible for their performance.

"We're being judged on something we didn't produce," said Deslauriers.

"Give me that kid K-8 and you can blame me all you want for these test scores," said Rouleau.

Statewide, schools that have compared the test scores of students who've moved to students who haven't have found that students who don't move do better, according to Vilaseca.

## Solutions

The state is working with the Agency of Human Services to reduce transience for students in foster care and to improve services for homeless children, said Mulcahy.

Vilaseca pointed to other efforts to improve education for poor students, such as increased access to pre-school and free lunches for all students who qualify for reduced lunch.

There are other possibilities, as well. Collins would like to see students who move within a narrow radius provided with transportation that would allow them to remain in their current schools.

The Common Core may help by providing uniform standards, suggested Vilaseca. His hometown, Union City, N.J., has created a highly successful school system in an area with a largely poor and immigrant population. One of the changes that district made was a uniform curriculum across all schools in the city to reduce disruption when students move from one neighborhood and school to another.

Asked about uniform curricula between neighboring supervisory unions, Vilaseca replied, "That would be a fabulous idea."

But ultimately, the solution may lie elsewhere.

"It's not a school problem. It's a housing problem," said Cavallo.

"Our rate of homelessness is...alarming," said Hoban. Families are remaining homeless for long periods of time. "It literally turns into months," he said.

"We're in this huge game of musical chairs," said Hoban, with families scrambling to find decent affordable places to live. "We have more need than we have housing."

