Switching schools affects student achievement, study

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Picture a kindergarten classroom of 20 students. By the time that class finishes fourth grade, only six students—30 percent—will have been continuously enrolled in the same school.

That kind of student mobility is creating academic problems for the students who move, but it's also a problem for those who remain, according to Jennifer Warlick, professor of economics and policy studies at the University of Notre Dame.

Warlick has been investigating the rate of school switching in South Bend—and the impact of changing schools on student achievement—with funding from a Rodney F. Ganey Collaborative Community-Based Research Mini-Grant, assisted by students in her "Economics of Education" class and her research assistant, undergraduate economics major Nick Krafft.

Using statistics the South Bend Community School Corp. (SBCSC) supplies to the Indiana Department of Education, a research analysis of data on 2,120 students has shown that of students who started kindergarten in 2003-04, only 30 percent of the students remained at the same school through fourth grade.

"Just over 11 percent changed schools at least once, but only during the summer," Warlick said. "The remaining 59 percent changed schools—during the school year—at least once over the five years."

Additionally, some students have been identified as “frequent movers”—a first grader who’s already been in three different schools, for example.

While students who change schools, especially frequent movers, can suffer psychologically, socially and academically, another important finding is that academic achievement of the “stable core”—the 30 percent of students who stay in one school—is also negatively affected by the school’s mobility rate.

It’s the result of what Warlick’s students Claire Smither and Ben Clarke, in a paper published in the Journal of Undergraduate Research, identify as “the chaos factor,” a term borrowed from the research of Russell Rumberger from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

New students coming into the classroom require more time from the teacher, decreasing teacher availability for the rest of the class, they note; routines are disrupted as the pace of instruction slows to accommodate new students, who may be behind in the curriculum.

The negative correlation between academic achievement and school switching is crucial information, Warlick notes. The SBCSC has a significant number of schools that are in the fourth year of non-compliance with the No Child Left Behind Act because of low test scores.

“That pressure makes us interested not just at the individual level—we all want children to learn more,” she says. “The question is, if we reduce mobility, could we not only help students, but bring the schools into compliance?”

Warlick is working on a follow-up grant proposal that will potentially reduce student mobility, but also will require a change in school

corporation policy—the grant would guarantee transportation, so that any child who starts at a school could stay there, even if the family moves across district lines. Test scores will be compared with those at schools where students moved away to determine if reducing mobility increases test scores.

Based on the results of the Ganey mini-grant research, Warlick and SBCSC officials already are implementing strategies to reduce student mobility—the first steps being the establishment of uniform withdrawal and enrollment procedures across schools, and the creation of posters and brochures to educate parents, before they decide to move.

“We need to tell people how detrimental it is to switch schools,” Warlick says. “We want to let people know how much they may be hurting their children. It puts kids behind, and they may never catch up.”

Provided by University of Notre Dame (news : web)

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