

Frequent school moves hurt low-income childrens' math scores

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Low-income students who change schools frequently are at risk for lower math scores and have a harder time managing their behavior and attention in the classroom than similar students who stay in the same school, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

Children who experienced fewer [school](#) transitions over a five-year period, demonstrated greater [cognitive skills](#) and higher math achievement in early elementary school, relative to their counterparts who changed schools frequently. This research, which involved children enrolled in the Chicago public school system, held true even after taking into account children's cognitive and math skills during Head Start preschool programs. It was published in the APA journal *Developmental Psychology*.

"Simply stated, frequently changing schools is a major risk factor for low-income children's school success," said the study's lead author, Allison Friedman-Krauss, PhD, of New York University.

On average, children in the study scored in an acceptable range on standardized math tests in fourth grade. However, children who moved frequently were predicted to score, on average, 10 points lower than (or over eight months behind) their peers who did not change schools frequently, placing them at greater risk of not meeting state math standards, the authors wrote.

"Although moving once or twice may not be extremely detrimental to the development of children who are already at risk, moving almost every year during elementary school increased the probability that students would face more difficulty in the long run," said co-author C. Cybele Raver, PhD, a professor of applied psychology at New York University. "This suggests the need for policies at the state, district and school levels to prevent school changes and to support students, families and teachers when children do change schools."

Data for the study came from 381 children (52 percent girls) enrolled in the Chicago School Readiness Project who initially enrolled in 35 Head Start classrooms around the city and were followed through fourth grade. The sample was 68 percent black or African-American, 27 percent Hispanic and 5 percent white, biracial or another race or ethnicity. All were from low-income families.

The students' early math skills were assessed while they were in Head Start and then again on a standardized math test in fourth grade. Cognitive skills and self-regulation were assessed in preschool using a mix of direct child assessments and observer reports and again in third grade using observer reports of the children's attention, impulsivity, and working memory skills. Information on their parents, their parents' education and race or ethnicity was also collected, in addition to the number of times the students switched schools during the five-year period.

On average, children moved 1.38 times over the five years between Head Start and third grade. 54 children (14 percent) remained in the same school between Head Start and third grade, whereas 327 children (86 percent) moved at least once over this time period. Forty children (10 percent) experienced frequent mobility, changing schools three or four times.

Third grade teachers reported that children who changed schools often were less likely to perform well on tasks that required more critical thinking skills, even after controlling for their cognitive skills in preschool.

The Chicago public schools system has an open enrollment policy that allows children to enroll in any of its schools, not just the one closest to their home. This increases parents' ability to change schools if they are unhappy with a school's climate, teachers or other students, according to the article.

"For [children](#) growing up in poverty in this urban Chicago sample, frequently changing schools is only one of many risks they face. If this cannot be prevented, providing supports to make the transition to a new school less disruptive and stressful, as well as preparing students in advance of the school change, may be important to mitigate the negative consequences of frequently changing schools," said Friedman-Krauss.

More information: "Does School Mobility Place Elementary School Children at Risk for Lower Math Achievement? The Mediating Role of Cognitive Dysregulation," by Allison H. Friedman-Krauss, PhD, and C. Cybele Raver, PhD, New York University, *Developmental Psychology*, published online Oct. 5, 2015.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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