

# DATA BRIEF: The Impact of Child Welfare System Involvement on School Stability: An Evaluation of Pittsburgh Public School Students

## SUMMARY

Changing schools in the middle of a school year can have a corrosive effect on students' learning and academic outcomes. A recent analysis of Pittsburgh Public School (PPS) student data suggests that those who experience child welfare out-of-home placements are at heightened risk of having their education disrupted by a mid-year school change. However, the analysis also found that placement-related school changes have declined over the nine-year period analyzed.

## BACKGROUND

Although few studies examine the link between school mobility and out-of-home placement,<sup>1</sup> studies do suggest that changing schools during the academic year is not a benign experience for students. School mobility puts students at greater risk for undesirable outcomes, such as low academic achievement,<sup>2</sup> behavioral problems leading to disciplinary action, and grade retention. Such changes may have a negative impact on their peer relationships and social environments. Lower achievement among those who change schools may also be a by-product of economic hardships, such as living in poverty or in unstable housing situations.

A study of Chicago students in kindergarten through grade seven found that 73 percent of those from low-income households changed schools at least once during elementary school; 21 percent did so three or more times. Those with frequent school changes performed about one year behind their peers on math and reading achievement tests. At least half of this achievement gap was attributed to frequent school mobility.<sup>3</sup>

This report summarizes the findings of a school mobility analysis conducted by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS), with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, to gain a better understanding of child welfare system barriers to school stability.

<sup>1</sup> Yu, E., Day, P., & Williams, M. "Improving educational outcomes for youth in care: A national collaboration." Washington, D.C.: Child Welfare League of America (2002).

<sup>2</sup> Mehana, Majida and Arthur J. Reynolds. "School mobility and achievement: a meta-analysis." *Children and Youth Services Review*. 26 (2004) 93-119.

<sup>3</sup> Temple, Judy A. and Arthur J. Reynolds. "School Mobility and Achievement: Longitudinal Findings From an Urban Cohort." *Journal of School Psychology*. 37: 4 (1999), 355-377.

## METHODOLOGY

The analysis was drawn from student and human services data that have been integrated for research and decision-making purposes under a formal data-sharing agreement between DHS and PPS, the largest school district in the county. These integrated data provide a comprehensive profile of students involved in human services and the analytic capacity to mine the data in ways that offer greater insight into students, service gaps and the effectiveness of interventions.

Two approaches were used in the analysis. The first examined the general mobility of PPS students who were involved in child welfare, relative to their non-involved peers, from School Year (SY) 2004–05 through 2010–11. The second focused on students in child welfare out-of-home placements, from SY 2004–05 through 2012–13, to examine how placement relates to non-standard school withdrawals, a measure of mobility that includes withdrawals not associated with the end of the academic year.

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Very few counties, cities or school districts have the ability to integrate child welfare data and school data in the way that the data-sharing agreement in Allegheny County allows. However, even with that hurdle removed, the analysis of school stability presented challenges. It required at least five iterations of the analysis to arrive at a satisfactory methodology. Even then, it was not possible to capture whether a placement directly led to a school disruption due to the lack of data related to the reason for school changes.

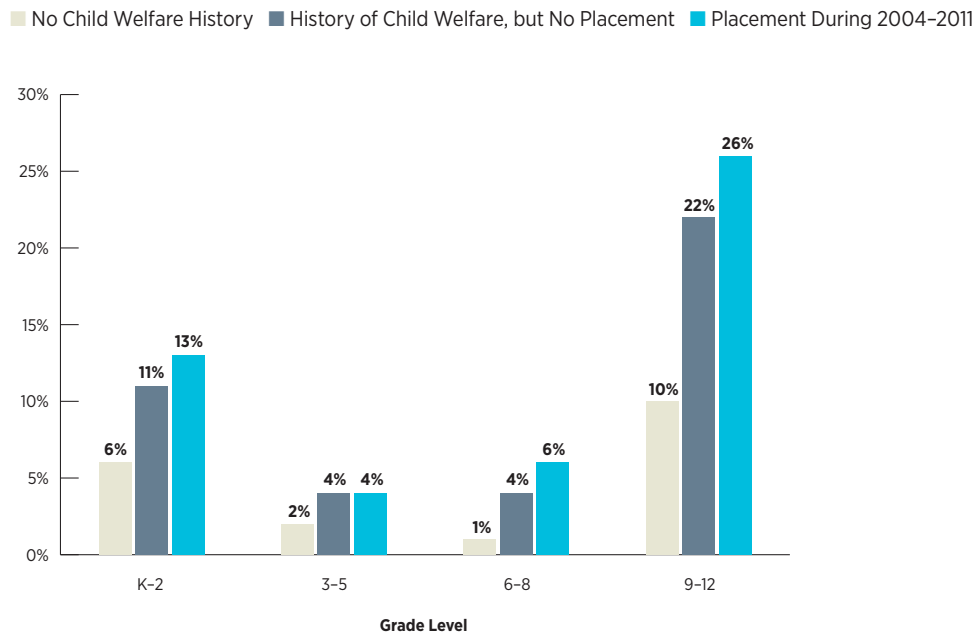
School district withdraw codes, for example, do not mention out-of-home placement as a reason for a move, instead using entries such as “left the district” or “transferred to another school within the district.” And child welfare caseworkers did not necessarily document whether a child who entered placement changed schools as a result of the placement. The analysis, therefore, focused on school disruptions proximate to placement, rather than school instability directly attributable to an out-of-home placement.

## CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT

About one-third of PPS students were involved in the child welfare system at some point during the study period. Of the more than 60,000 students included in the analysis, 66 percent had no child welfare involvement, 24 percent had child welfare involvement but no history of out-of-home placement, and the remaining 10 percent (approximately 6,000 children) had child welfare involvement that included an out-of-home placement.

When grade retention was examined across grade levels, significant disparities related to child welfare involvement were found. Between one percent and 10 percent of students with no child welfare experience repeated a grade, as compared to four through 22 percent of children with child welfare experience and four through 26 percent of children who had experienced a child welfare out-of-home placement.

**FIGURE 1: Grade Retention by Child Welfare Involvement, PPS Students, SY 2004–05 through SY 2010–11**



**Child Welfare Involvement and School Mobility**

Changing schools within the school year is not an uncommon occurrence. Some 47 percent of all PPS students did so during the period covered in the analysis.

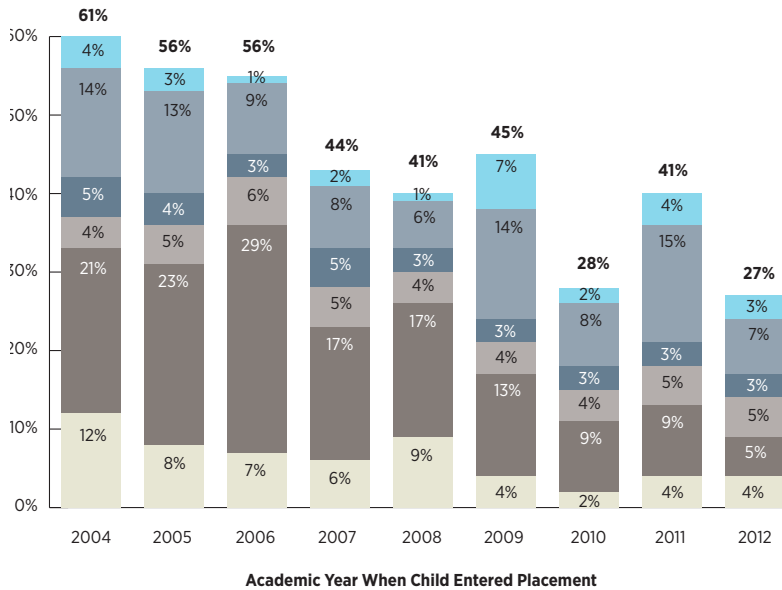
Students with child welfare experience, however, changed schools at significantly higher rates. For example, 58 percent of students with child welfare involvement changed schools at some point during the study period, as did 79 percent of those with child welfare involvement that included an out-of-home placement.

**Figure 2** presents an examination of 2,306 PPS students in child welfare placement from SY 2004–05 through SY 2012–13. This analysis includes only those students enrolled in PPS at the time of placement in order to assess whether they had a change in school proximate to that child welfare placement. In order to capture all potential placement-related school changes, school changes two weeks before and after the placement were also included.

School mobility declined 20 percent from SY 2004–05 through SY 2008–09. Beginning in SY 2009–10, school mobility fluctuated but remained consistently below that at the beginning of the study period. The time between placement and school change also increased in recent years.

**FIGURE 2: School Mobility Proximate to Child Welfare Placement, PPS Students, SY 2004–05 through SY 2012-13**

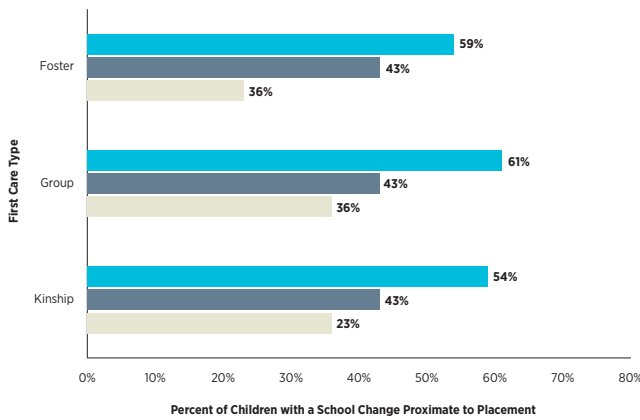
■ Prior to Placement, within 2 weeks  
 ■ Within 2 weeks of placement  
 ■ 15 to 30 days post placement  
 ■ 31 to 60 days post placement  
 ■ More than 60 days post placement  
 ■ Within 2 weeks after placement



School stability improved across all demographic categories and care types. Improvement was consistent by race and gender, although, as shown in **Figures 3 and 4**, the degree of improvement varied across placement types and age categories.

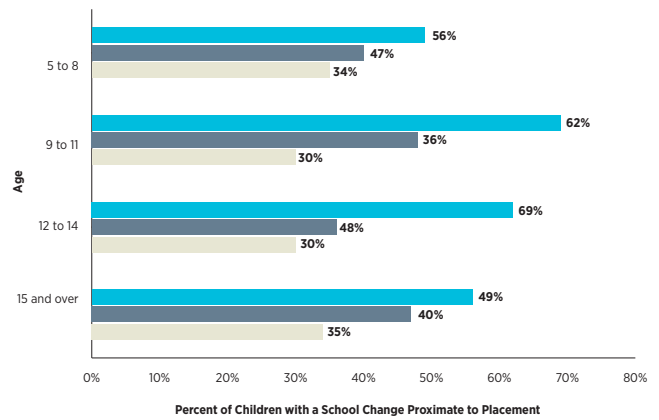
**FIGURE 3: School Change by Placement Type**

■ 2004–2006  
 ■ 2007–2009  
 ■ 2010–2012



**FIGURE 4: School Change by Age Category**

■ 2004–2006  
 ■ 2007–2009  
 ■ 2010–2012



Not surprisingly, the longer students stayed in placement, the more likely they were to change schools. For example, during the three-year period from SY 2010–11 through SY 2012–13, the rate of school change was 13 percent for students in placement less than 30 days and increased to 46 percent for students in placement six months or more.

The number of placement changes was another significant factor in the likelihood of school change. During the same three-year period, 19 percent of students with a single placement changed schools. This is compared to 49 percent of students with one to two placement changes and 62 percent of students with three or more placement changes.

Another variable was the type of placement. During the three-year period, just 23 percent of children in kinship care changed schools, compared to 36 percent of students in foster or congregate care.

### IMPROVED STABILITY

Decreased school mobility among students in out-of-home placement cannot be attributed to a single initiative, policy or practice. Rather, it is likely the result of a confluence of factors that place a greater emphasis on improving school stability for children and youth in the child welfare system. Several of these factors have come into play in recent years.

- Awareness of the importance of school stability has been on the rise for several years, driven by local and national research and the impact of regulatory changes. School stability is an increasingly common measure of well-being in the child welfare system.
- This issue has taken on greater significance in federal and state policy, through legislation such as the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 and the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001, which both contain provisions addressing school stability.
- Recent guidance from the Pennsylvania Departments of Human Services and Education also places greater emphasis on school stability and has led to widespread training for caseworkers and others involved with children in placement.
- Judges in Allegheny County's Court of Common Pleas/Family Division and partners such as the child advocates with KidsVoice have placed an increasing emphasis on educational outcomes and school stability.
- In 2010, DHS created the position of education liaison to function as the point of contact between schools and human services (e.g., child welfare, homelessness services, and early childhood intervention and education). The education liaison has been instrumental in strengthening relationships between educators and child welfare staff, increasing awareness of educational issues facing children in out-of-home placement, and improving communication among those whose work involves these children. An important role of the education liaison

has been to expand training on educational issues as they relate to children in child welfare. Education stability is a core element of this training, which is provided to every caseworker as well as to external partners such as Family Court judges.

- The data-sharing partnership between DHS and PPS has become a catalyst for wider discussion and collaboration among DHS, school officials, judges and a broad group of community stakeholders on a diverse set of issues related to improving the educational outcomes of students involved in human services. It has also led to stronger relationships among caseworkers, probation officers, juvenile court judges, school guidance counselors and others who, while they work to improve the well-being of many of the same children, have not always done so in concert.

### ONGOING COMMITMENT

Educational stability remains a priority issue within DHS, the juvenile court system and elsewhere. In recent years, community collaborations have emerged to address children's educational issues, including those of children in child welfare placement. These include the Education Stability Truancy Prevention workgroup, created within the Allegheny County Children's Roundtable Initiative, which includes Family Court judges and representatives from juvenile probation and DHS.

**“While there has been a decline in school disruption, there are still children who experience disruption in proximity to placement. There are certain groups particularly at risk, such as older children and children in congregate care.”**

“We have a continuing commitment to reducing school disruptions during placement,” said Emily Kulick, manager of external partnerships in DHS's Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation. “While there has been a decline in school disruption, there are still children who experience disruption in proximity to placement. There are certain groups particularly at risk, such as older children and children in congregate care.”

DHS has developed a software tool that helps match children in placement to homes that best fit their circumstances, including educational considerations. The software was developed with support from a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Children's Bureau grant, awarded to DHS for the purpose of exploring ways to improve educational stability and permanency outcomes for children in the child welfare system.

When making a non-kinship placement decision, a caseworker enters information about the child and the software matches that information to data about all available foster and group homes, ranked by factors that reflect the best interests of the child. Such factors include the most family-like setting, the location in respect to the child's home community and school, and the capacity to address behavioral and physical health challenges.

The goal is to improve placement stability, permanency and well-being for children in care by making better-informed placement decisions. Expected results include reducing the number of children in congregate care, who data suggest are among the most likely to experience school disruption. Use of the placement tool is also expected to improve neighborhood and school stability by ranking placement options based on proximity to the child's permanent home.

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CONTENT AND ANALYSIS

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