Best Practices for Educating Students Who Are Highly Mobility

By Jeff Williams

The United States is trying to increase the academic performance in the educational system in order to be competitive in the world market. While this is happening, children are being left behind, “…most of whom reside in poor urban communities” (Biernat & Jax, 2000, p. 1). Researchers have found that “Students with nearly perfect attendance on average had reading scores 20 points higher than those who attended less than 84% of the time” (Hinz, E., Kapp, L., & Snapp, S. et al. 2003, p. 142). This problem is a growing concern. Students are not meeting the national standards at increasing rates, especially students who are highly mobile. The best way to help students who are highly mobile reach the national standards is to inform general education teachers, more specifically, secondary general education teachers, how to help students reach academic standards. The most effective way to reach this goal is to inform general education teachers of the best practices needed for highly mobile students to reach standards.

High mobility and its impacts on learning:

First of all, I would like to define “highly mobile”. Being an “at-risk” student is already well defined in common discourse, those who are at risk for school failure. High mobility, for this article, is defined as follows, “mobility is a common experience found with other risk factors, such as high poverty, homelessness, placement in foster care, or being a child of migrant workers” (Grant, Popp, & Stronge, 2008, p. 2). In recent years, studies have shown that students are demonstrating a decreasing regularity of enrollment and attendance. Empirical data has shown that many students do not remain in the same school for a long enough time to receive the benefits of an uninterrupted education. According to the Biernat and Jax’s report entitled Limiting Mobility and Improving Student Achievement (2000), students who move regularly are lower achievers. This report also indicated that 41 percent of students who were highly mobile were lower achievers compared to 26 percent of their peers who had never moved schools. In addition to these findings, the authors report that moving more than three times increases a student’s chance for repeating a grade, as well as increasing the chance that a student will develop behavior problems, which in turn, may lead to more missed classes and academic difficulties.

There are myriad of reasons why students who are highly mobile do not reach the same achievement levels as their non-mobile peers. The biggest impacts relate to attendance. If the child is not in the classroom for instruction, then he or she is exposed to less content and has less of a chance to practice the materials than his or her peers. Another factor that is closely related to attendance is the issue that different schools and districts use different curriculum. When a child moves schools or districts there is no guarantee that he or she will possess the skills that his or her new school will value as essential to academic tasks. In addition to differences in curriculum between schools, there is also a high likelihood that different schools will have different allocation of funds. According to Briernat and Jax (2000), these differences in allocation of funds may result in students not receiving the same support for students who are low achieving or no supports at all. Another significant impact is a child’s social economic status; if a child’s basic needs are not being met, he or she is not able to learn.
**Best practices:**

First and foremost, a teacher must be effective. James Stronge developed and published a list of what an effective teacher is in *Qualities of Effective Teachers* (2007). According to the findings of Grant et al. (2008), the six essential characteristics that best serve students who are highly mobile are:

- Teacher background characteristics—effective teachers have knowledge of content they teach and pedagogical knowledge needed to teach their specific students and content.
- The teacher as a person—effective teachers are teachers who are caring, understand the needs of their students, and get to know students and their families.
- Classroom management—effective teachers create a safe and positive learning environment.
- Planning and organization for instruction—teachers plan lessons based on the skills students need to succeed.
- Instructional delivery—effective teachers deliver high quality instruction through the utilization of various approaches to meet the needs of students.
- Monitoring student progress and potential—effective teachers monitor progress, provide feedback, and make adjustments. (Grant et al., 2008, p. 13-14)

In addition to these qualities a teacher should possess, he or she must have a particular mindset. Teachers who are educating students who are highly mobile must possess an open mind. “Educators must begin to view their own classroom through the eyes of a child who is hungry, who is sick, and who cries deeply inside for love, support, and stability” (Barton, 1998, p.392). The way teachers view their classrooms has a great effect on how children learn. “As John Dewey often reminded us, the child’s entire life world must be taken into account” (Barton, 1998, p. 392). If educators adapt their curriculum to meet all their students’ needs, specifically those of a child who is highly mobile, the chances for success are far greater.

The text that follows contains the recommended best practices to meet the academic needs of secondary students who are highly mobile; while these practices are designed for secondary students, they can be adapted to meet the needs of students in all grades. The first considerations that need to be taken in account happen before the student arrives. Teachers need to “plan mini-units based on state expectations but also… ensure that learning and performance standards prepare students for transitioning from high school to college and/or career” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 12). Some of the key content in these unit plans are: literacy, mathematics, and writing. It is also crucial that teachers “have rules and procedures printed so they can be distributed to students who weren’t in class during the first few weeks of school when such items are a main focus” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 12). Planning for the student’s future success before he or she arrive at the school is a critical attribute for predicting the success for the child.

There are a number of preparations school districts should make prior to the students arrival. According to Titus (2007), Department of Defense schools have high graduation rates with students who are highly mobile due in part because of the administration policies in place. Some of these policies include: “policy coherence and regular data flow regarding instructional goals, assessments, accountability, and professional training and development” (Titus, 2007, p. 88). “Timely transfer of
student records, immediate new student orientation which includes a transition buddy, access to after school extracurricular programs, [and] reciprocal graduation requirements for course substitution, waivers, and testing” (Titus, 2007, p. 94). It is suggested by Titus, a former administrator, that a universal program that is based upon the DOD model be adopted in every school.

When a student arrives at the new school, there are practices that need to take place immediately in order to use all available time effectively. With students who are highly mobile, every second of instructional time is crucial. Some of the practices teachers can use, according to Grant et al. (2008), are curriculum-based measures (CBM) in order to determine current skill level in an efficient manner. Teachers also need to provide relevant, challenging, and meaningful learning opportunities that bring the students’ focus to essential knowledge and skills. There need to be opportunities for one-on-one or small group tutoring. According to Grant et al. (2008), this practice has been proven to increase student achievement and decrease dropout rates. Teachers need to solicit feedback from students on how they feel about their own understanding of the material and their interests. Teachers also have to use a variety of teaching strategies and change strategies when one is ineffective. The teacher observations reported in the Grant et al. (2008) study used 8 instructional strategies per hour of instruction; this resulted in the students being engaged in different activities at different times throughout the instruction.

Another effective practice that Grant et al. (2008) recommend using is: allowing homework to be completed at school. This requires that the focus of the homework is on critical attributes of the material being learned. Allowing students to complete homework at school is crucial because some highly mobile students do not have the resources available to use at home, and others do not have a home where they can complete their homework. Homework should also be practice; the material presented in the homework should not be new concepts that might be difficult for students to grasp. Teachers need to keep portfolios of work samples and CBM records that demonstrate the student’s growth, and will provide future teachers with insights to the students learning. Teachers should also include students in the goal setting process, this includes having them help analyze pre-assessment data, and the student should chart his or her own progress as well as determine whether a goal was achieved or not.

No matter how long a student attends a class, the teacher plays a key role in the student’s learning. “Effective teachers are able to blend academic, affective, and technical needs of their highly mobile students across their planning, instruction, and assessment to make the most of the time they have with the students” (Grant et al., 2008, p. 18). While teachers may have a limited amount of time with a student, they still can be part of the process that helps students who are highly mobile reach the school, district, state, and/or national standards. Too many times students who attend more than 3 schools in their academic career are allowed to slip through the cracks.

Practices exist that have been proven effective in helping students who are highly mobile succeed. These methods take effort, time, and an open mind. These same practices used to help secondary students who are highly mobile succeed may be applied to every student in all grades with little effort. The practices discussed in this article, while intended for secondary students who are highly mobile, can be
effectively implemented to every student throughout the continuum of the educational community.

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References


