Policy Matters

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The Uprooted: Student Mobility and Academic Underachievement Among Mexican Americans

Executive Summary

Latinos constitute a large and rapidly growing segment of the K-12 student population in the United States, and especially so in states such as California. They are also more likely than other students to suffer problems such as academic underachievement and school dropout. This study shows that, while poverty may determine some of these educational disadvantages, high levels of "non-promotional student mobility" also play an important role—contributing to the breakdown of social capital among Mexican American youth and increasing their risk of dropping out. As for the causes of student mobility, this study finds that moves from one school to another are often unrelated to residential moves. Instead, such moves are often initiated by schools or by students themselves who feel alienated in their current schools. Finally, this report suggests that schools need to be held more accountable for moves that have detrimental effects on Latino student performance, and offers ways for schools and youth peer groups to reduce the incidence of Latino student mobility and its detrimental effects on academic performance.

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Introduction

The number of U.S. Latinos (approximately 42 million) is increasing at a rate of eight times that of the population on whole (Vernez & Mizell, 2002). By 2025 a quarter of all U.S. K-12 students will be of Spanish-speaking origin (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000a). The highest concentration of Latino school-age children will continue to be in the southwest (although many other regions of the country also show large percentage increases in Latino students). In fact no group will do more to change California's system of education in the years ahead than Latinos, whose student population has tripled since 1986 and is projected to increase by more than 40% between 2000 and 2015, per Figure 1.

Figure 1: Projected percent increase in Hispanic school-age population (ages 5-17), 2000 to 2015
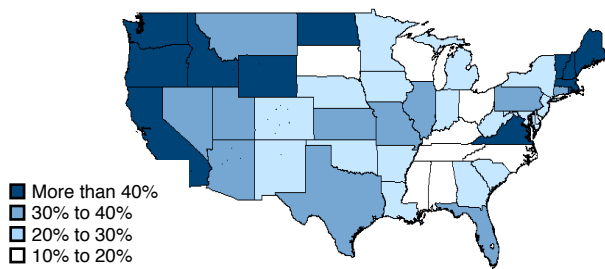

Source. U.S. Census Bureau Series A population projections by age, sex, race, and Latino origin for 1995 to 2025.

The rising number of Latinos brings with it a growing concern regarding their status as students in schools (Conchas, 2001): Latino student underachievement and dropout rates are disproportionately high (Latinos in Education, 1998). Figure 2 illustrates trends in the nature of the Latino high school dropout rate, which in 2001 was approximately twice that of Blacks and more than three times that of non-Latino Whites.

Considerable differences exist in the educational experiences and outcomes of U.S. Latinos (Suarez-Orozco, 1991), and this only underscores the need to delineate Latino sub-populations. In particular, children of Mexican descent, who constitute two-thirds of all U.S. Latinos, are among the most challenged of all U.S. Latino subgroups (Gibson, Gándara & Koyama, 2004). Mexican Americans

score significantly lower on Stanford achievement tests and are dropping out of school at higher rates than their same-age Latino peers who are not of Mexican descent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000b; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Hence, the U.S.—and California in particular—is presented with a growing problem: Mexican American educational achievement and attainment are significantly below the national average (College Board, 1999; Valencia, 2002). This is cause for serious concern and it is important for policymakers to think about what should and can be done about these perplexing trends (Tienda, 2001).

Figure 2: Status dropout rates of 18- to 24-year-olds by race/ethnicity, 1981-2001
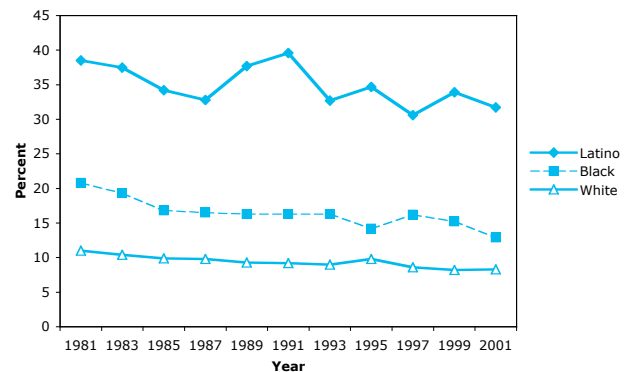
Source: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Current Population Survey (CPS). Dropout Rates in the United States, Prepared January 2004.

Existing Research

Contemporary research offers various reasons for Mexican American underachievement, and poverty stands out as a consistently important factor (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Rothstein, 2004). Questions still remain, however, as to *how* and *why* poverty matters. For instance, studies have yet to explain why some middle-class minority students consistently perform below non-Latino Whites, even though they may share similar economic and family backgrounds (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). And while differences in language use, parenting styles, and even cultural tastes and preferences have been cited for decades in association with Mexican American underachievement and high dropout rates (Trueba, 1988; Gándara, 1994), first-generation immigrant students often exhibit quite optimistic perceptions of their schooling experiences (Buriel, 1984)

and sometimes even outperform their more acculturated peers (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Thus, low average levels of educational achievement and attainment among U.S. Latinos, especially those of Mexican origin, remain a persistent and complex problem that demands both greater understanding and targeted policy responses.

Although research on school dropout is extensive, some aspects remain under-studied—in particular the social aspects of the process that leads young people to leave school before obtaining high school diplomas (Ryan 2000). One view of the Latino dropout problem, based on theories and empirical studies of "social capital,"[1] calls for educators to consider more carefully the resources and forms of assistance found in adolescents' informal networks of social support (e.g., among their same-age peers and friends) and also in their more formal school-based social networks (e.g., expert counselor/teacher knowledge about the complexities of college admission). What this perspective offers is a focus not only on network resources critical to school completion, but also on those complex institutional processes that can either facilitate or inhibit the trust necessary for *help giving* and *help seeking*—two forms of agency associated with the accumulation and exchange of social capital.

Current Study

Recent studies suggest that *student mobility* (or non-promotional school changes that may or may not be associated with a change of residence) contributes to the breakdown in the social networks of Mexican origin youth (Ream, 2003) and also exacerbates the dropout problem among Latinos (Rumberger, 2003). While students typically make scheduled school changes due to promotion from one type of school to another, such as elementary school to middle school or middle school to high school, increasing numbers of students are moving from one school to another for reasons other than normal promotion (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994; Swanson & Schneider, 1999). Despite the evidence, however, the issue of student mobility has not received much attention from educational researchers, practitioners, or policy makers. This policy brief links the social capital literature with research on the incidence, consequences, and causes of student mobility to address the dropout problem among Mexican origin youth.[2] We find that for many youth of Mexican descent,

school completion is adversely impacted by the instability in social relationships that accompanies their particularly high rates of transience. We refer to the process by which mobility impacts social networks and school completion as the *mobility/social capital dynamic* (Ream, 2005b).

Our study addresses the following questions:

1. What is the incidence of student and residential mobility among youth of Mexican origin?
2. What are the social and educational consequences of student mobility? Does student mobility influence adolescents' friendship networks? Does student mobility impact school completion/dropout?
3. Do disparate adolescent friendship networks (networks of school-oriented friends or friendship networks that include school dropouts) affect school completion differently?
4. Do friendship networks mediate the impact of student mobility on school dropout?
5. What are the causes of student mobility?
6. What strategies can be used to reduce the incidence of student mobility and to mitigate the potentially harmful effects of student mobility?

Student Mobility

Were mobility not so commonplace, it might not warrant the attention of educators and policymakers. A growing body of research shows, however, that student mobility is widespread in schools and districts throughout the United States. In fact, most children make at least one school change independent of promotion to the next grade level, and many change schools more frequently than that (Rumberger, 2003). In California the incidence of mobility is especially high, with almost three-quarters of students making at least one non-promotional school change between grades 1 and 12 (Rumberger et al., 1998). Mobility is particularly pronounced within large, predominantly minority, urban school districts with high concentrations of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (McDonnell & Hill, 1993). One in every five urban and suburban high schools in California has a mobility rate in excess of 30 percent (Rumberger et al., 1999). Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, reported a high school "transiency rate" (measured as the proportion of students who entered after

school started or left before school ended to those who proceeded from start to finish in the same school) exceeding 35 percent for the 2001-2002 school year (LAUSD, 2004).

Latinos change residence more often than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States. Between 2002 and 2003 Latinos were found to have moved at considerably higher rates (18 percent) than non-Latino Whites (12.4 percent) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). The Mexican American majority of U.S. Latinos are also highly mobile. A nationally representative sample of 1988 eighth graders shows that thirty-seven percent of Mexican American adolescents changed residences at least once between grades 8 and 12. During this same four-year period, Mexican American adolescents also frequently changed schools without being promoted from one grade to the next (30 percent made at least one non-promotional school change, compared to 20 percent of Whites). And the mobility rate for highly mobile students (those making two or more school changes between 8th and 12th grade) was nearly twice as high for Mexican Americans as for Whites (Ream, 2005a).[3]

> *Latinos change residence more often than any other racial or ethnic group in the United States*

It is not surprising that student mobility is particularly pronounced among Mexican Americans who constitute by far the most significant of recently immigrated communities and thus the very population most susceptible to various kinds of economic and social instability.

Consequences of Student Mobility for Mexican American Adolescents

To begin our study of the *mobility/social capital dynamic*, we depict Mexican American friendship networks and rates of school completion among students who made zero, one, two or more non-promotional school changes over the four-year period between grades 8 and 12 (1988-1992).[4]

The results in Table 1 show that adolescents' friendship networks and school completion rates are influenced by student mobility.[5] Compared to their mobile peers, stable Mexican origin youth reported higher average levels of pro-academic friendships (on a par with the entire national

sample of 8th grade students) and much lower levels of association with dropouts. In contrast, students who made 2 or more school changes were *less likely* to associate with friends who value education and *much more likely* to befriend dropouts. Moreover, Mexican American students who changed schools between grades 8 and 12 were *less likely* to complete high school than those who remained in the same high school for four years. While a remarkable ninety-eight percent of Mexican American students who remained in the same high school received a high school diploma, 95 percent of students who changed schools once and 87 percent of students who changed schools two or more times received a regular high school diploma.[6]

Table 1. Friendship networks and school completion by non-promotional school changes, Grades 8-12

	Number of School Changes, Grades 8-12		
	0	1	2
Peer Social Capital (10th grade)*			
Friends Value Education (average)	.00	-.14	-.37
Number of Dropout Friends (average)	.20	.51	.69
School Completion (12th grade)			
Graduated High School (%)	98	95	87
Did not Graduate High School (%)	2	5	13

Differences between 0 school change and 2+ school changes are statistically significant at the .01 level. School changes from grades 8-12 based on data from the NELS:88 12th grade student questionnaire. School changes exclude those resulting from promotion from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. * Values are in relation to the overall survey average (so, -.37 indicates .37 standard deviations below the average). SOURCE: National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988. Data drawn from the panel of base-year Mexican American students who were re-surveyed in 1990 and 1992 (N=1,335). Statistics weighted (f2pnlwt).

Although these data show that adolescents who change schools are (a) less likely to associate with academically oriented peers, (b) more likely to hang out with dropouts, and (c) less likely to graduate from high school, they do not reveal whether school changes were the primary cause or

whether other characteristics of students—such as socio-economic status (SES), family composition, and prior student mobility—contributed to school changes, peer network affiliations, and dropout. In order to better assess whether school changes at the secondary level impact friendship networks to the detriment of high school completion, we performed a multivariate statistical analysis of the NELS data.[7]

By examining the simultaneous effects of various background factors, we were able to determine the unique or independent impact of changing schools on adolescent friendship affiliations and the likelihood of high school graduation and dropout after controlling for the effects of other background factors.[8] Thus, to investigate the *mobility/social capital dynamic*, we examined the impact of non-promotional school changes (between grades 8 and 12) on adolescent friendship networks and dropout—while controlling for the effects of SES, two-parent family composition, and prior (K-8) student mobility.

The following four conditions must be satisfied to substantiate that completing high school is adversely impacted by the social network instability that accompanies student transience. First, controlling for family background and prior student mobility, variation in levels of student mobility at the secondary level must significantly account for variations in adolescent friendship networks (see Figure 3). Second, variation in levels of student mobility must significantly account for variations in school dropout in the absence of the social network mediators (see Figure 4). Third, variations in the social networks of adolescent youth must significantly account for variations in school dropout (see Figure 5). Lastly, controlling for the impact of student mobility on adolescent friendship networks and the impact of friendship networks on dropout, the previously significant association between student mobility and school dropout (see Figure 4) must be reduced—in the strongest case to insignificance (Baron and Kenny 1986; Shrout and Bolger 2002).[9]

Student mobility influences adolescent friendship networks. A long line of research suggests that for every "leading crowd" there is also a "rebellious crowd" (Coleman, 1961), that where there are high school "jocks" there are "burn-outs" (Eckert, 1989). Student mobility appears to impact competing (note the negative correlation between Friends

Value Education and Friend Dropped out of School) friendship affiliations—and in particular, the propensity for Mexican Americans to befriend school dropouts, per Figure 3.[10]

Figure 3. The impact of student mobility on competing adolescent friendship networks
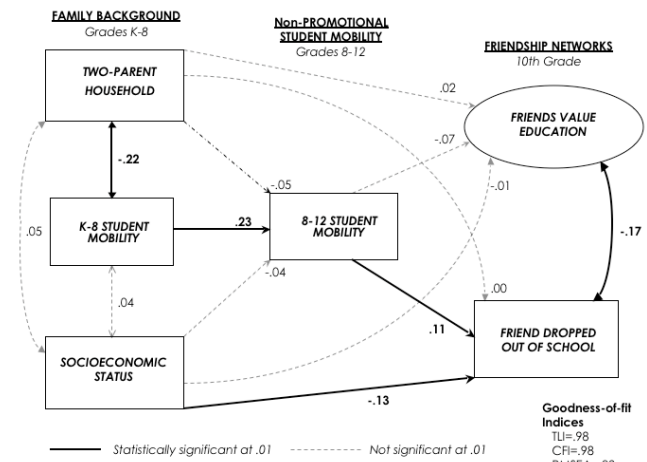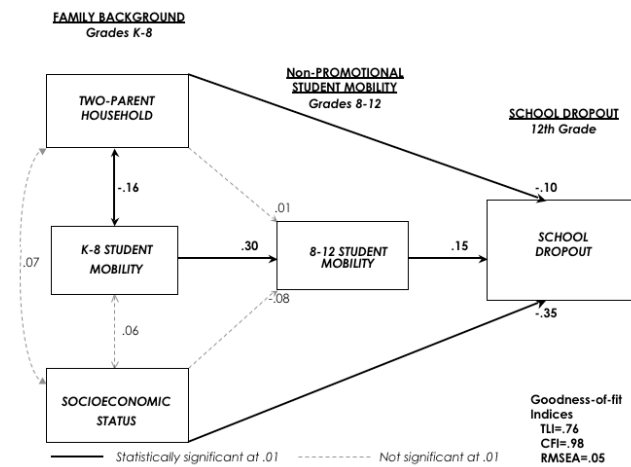

School changes exclude those due to promotion from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. SOURCE: National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, 8th grade panel from the 1992 second follow-up survey (N=1,335).

Specifically, one standard deviation (1 SD) increase in student mobility (which approximates one additional school change between 8th and 12th grade) increases students' propensity to associate with others who have dropped out of school by .11 SD.[11] The negative impact of one additional school change on students' propensity to hang out with school-oriented friends (-.07 SD) is not statistically significant in this model, however. So while school-oriented friendship networks co-exist, however tenuously, alongside their "street-oriented" counterparts (Flores-Gonzalez, 2002), student mobility among youth of Mexican origin seems to tip their friendship affiliations toward students who drop out of school.

Student mobility also influences school dropout. Although the impact of mobility on academic achievement remains the subject of some debate, its strongest and most consistent educational impact is on students' prospects for graduation from high school (Rumberger, 2003).[12] With the background controls in place, the estimates in Figure 4 corroborate a growing body of evidence that implicates student

mobility in the process of school dropout.[13] One additional school change between grades 8 and 12 increases school dropout by .15 SD. It should also be noted that socioeconomic status (SES) is an especially powerful deterrent to school dropout (-.35 SD), and two-parent family composition also reduces school dropout by -.10 SD. So while advantaged socioeconomic status and two-parent family households increase the likelihood of school completion, student mobility works in the opposite direction, exacerbating the dropout problem among Mexican origin youth.

Figure 4. The impact of student mobility on school dropout

School changes exclude those due to promotion from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. SOURCE: National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, 8th grade panel from the 1992 second follow-up survey (N=1,335). **p<.01. Statistics weighted (f2pnlwt).

There are several reasons as to why student mobility may negatively impact educational attainment. Adapting to a new school environment can be a challenging proposition for anyone. This is particularly so for adolescent youth who are in the midst of a difficult developmental life stage characterized by increased peer orientation, invidious social comparison, dissonant identities, and increasing autonomy from family control (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). New classmates and teachers as well as changing academic standards and behavioral expectations must be adjusted to in an often compressed time-frame (Jason et al., 1992). The lack of an adequate administrative system responsive to transient families may also play a role. Such a system would entail a sort of safety net or support system designed to help in an

efficient, intensive, and compassionate manner new students through the stages of acclimation. In the absence of such a system, we often find a syndrome of misplaced transcripts, misdirected classroom placements, and curricular incoherence between sending and receiving schools that tends to exacerbate already difficult transitions for mobile students (Rumberger et al., 1999).

> *While advantaged socioeconomic status and two-parent family households increase the likelihood of school completion, student mobility works in the opposite direction*

Mid-year school changes in particular are nearly synonymous with awkward transitions during which students may be mistakenly transplanted into classes they have already taken, or re-situated in classrooms where they are ill prepared to succeed (Ream, 2005a). And as we illustrate in Figure 3 above, student mobility also seems to tip friendship affiliations toward students who drop out of school. We have yet to establish, however, whether *variations in the social networks of adolescent youth account for variations in school dropout*. To address this issue we turn to the data depicted in Figure 5.

Competing friendship networks influence school dropout differently. Same-age peers and friendship groups exert considerable influence on adolescents' academic and social behavior (Berndt 2002) through information exchange (Berndt 1999), modeling (Juvonen and Wentzel 1996),[14] reinforcement of norms and values (Berndt and Keefe 1995), and even coercion (Matsueda and Anderson 1998). While several studies have linked deviant peer affiliations in early adolescence to subsequent maladaptive outcomes (Fuligni et al. 2001), relatively few have examined the influence of same-age peers and friends on dropout behavior. Those that have are confronted with the need to consider diverse characteristics of adolescent peer networks as competing predictors of school attainment (Crosnoe and Needham 2004, Farmer et al. 2003). Mexican Americans may be particularly amenable to the competing influences of their school- and street-oriented peers (Giordano et al. 1986), per Figure 5. With the family background controls in place, one standard deviation increase in *Friends Value Education* reduces

school dropout by .24 SD, while a similar increase in the prevalence of friends who are dropouts increases a student's likelihood of dropping out of school by .18 SD. Again, socioeconomic status (SES) is an especially forceful deterrent of school dropout and, to a lesser degree so is two- parent family composition. It also appears that befriending others who value schooling improves one's likelihood of completing high school, but having dropout friends diminishes the likelihood of securing a high school diploma (Kasen, Cohen and Brook, 1998; Rumberger and Thomas, 2000).

Figure 5. The impact of competing adolescent friendship networks on school dropout
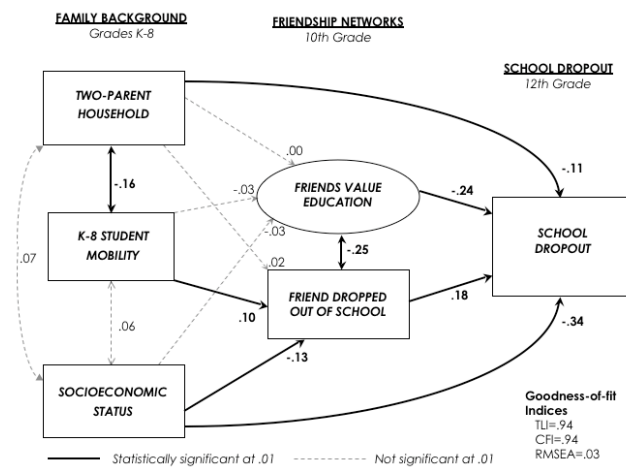
School changes exclude those due to promotion from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. SOURCE: National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988, 8th grade panel from the 1992 second follow-up survey (N=1,335). **p<.01. Statistics weighted (f2pnlwt).

Friendship networks can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of student mobility on dropout. The findings depicted in Figures 3-5 suggest school completion among youth of Mexican origin depends heavily on students' socioeconomic status. The incidence of student mobility also exacerbates school dropout, per Figure 4. Then, too, the composition of adolescent friendship affiliations influences school completion/dropout, per Figure 5. In particular, students whose friends value education are more likely to graduate, while those who affiliate with dropouts are less likely to complete high school.[15] So while the data in Figure 4 suggest that student mobility directly influences dropout, its effect may depend, in part, on the influence of mobility on competing adolescent friendship affiliations, per Figure 3.

Do friendship affiliations have the divergent potential to mediate (in the case of school-oriented friends) or exacerbate (in the case of dropout friends) the impact of student mobility on school completion and dropout? Is there cause for concern regarding the mobility/social capital dynamic whereby school completion may be adversely affected by the impact of student mobility on adolescents' friendship networks? If so, then the direct influence of student mobility on school dropout in Figure 4 will be reduced (in the strongest case to insignificance), when controlling for the influence of student mobility on friendship networks and their influence on dropout. In fact, the significant parameter associating student mobility and dropout in Figure 4 (.15 SD) is nearly halved (.08 SD)—indeed, to a level of statistical insignificance—with the friendship network variables in place.[16] So while mobility tends to disrupt the social root systems of academically oriented friends who would otherwise fortify school success, it simultaneously—and rather paradoxically—strengthens the social root systems of dropout friends who disrupt others' success in school. Thus, mobile students are disconnected from their school oriented peers.

Social scientists have long understood that the norm of "reciprocity" (the you-scratch-my-back-I'll-scratch-yours underpinnings of balanced or mutually beneficial relationships) is one fundamental ingredient in the development of social capital (i.e., access to resources via cooperative social exchange). Neither mobile students nor those with whom they intermittently cross paths are particularly motivated to invest in relationships lacking time-earned trust, however (Rumberger et al., 1999).[17] Students and teachers know that newly arriving students, especially mid-year school changers, are often here today and gone tomorrow. Under such conditions, stable, school-oriented students may be less inclined to invest in mobile students whom they see as unlikely to reciprocate (Wehlage et al., 1989). And with repeated experience of mobility, transient students often be-

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come resigned, if only as a coping strategy, to lowered expectations of social support (Ream, 2005a).[18]

The Causes of Mexican American Student Mobility

At the secondary school level, parents, students, and school personnel all make decisions that contribute to high rates of student mobility. Under the best of circumstances, mobility is the product of aspiration, opportunity, and rational action. The reality, however, is that adolescents often change schools suddenly and reactively—when, for example, an unpredictable job market causes working-class parents to scramble after insecure employment opportunities, or when parents split up and a custodial parent leaves town. Under optimal conditions a genuine strategy underlies a school change, with parents and students acting as rational actors and informed consumers in the educational "marketplace." Frequently, however, students change schools for reasons that are neither entirely beyond their control nor exclusively the result of strategic forethought (Rumberger et al., 1998; Ream, 2005a).

Many people believe that the main reason students change school is because their families move. However, changing residence does not necessarily result in a student's changing schools. Families sometimes change residences and still remain in the same school attendance area. Recent legislation in California enables students to remain in their local school even if their family moves to another school's attendance area. Moreover, just as students may move without changing schools, some students change schools without moving. Table 2 illustrates the distinction between residential and student mobility. According to the NELS data, between the 8th and 12th grade, 45 percent of residential moves made by Mexican-American families did not lead to students' changing schools. Among non-Latino Whites, the figure is even higher (51 percent). Conversely, just as students may move without changing schools, some students change schools without moving. Thirty percent of all school changes among Mexican origin youth are not associated with a change of residence (the figure among non-Latino Whites is at 27 percent).[19]

Not only do these numbers distinguish residential from student mobility, but they also suggest that Mexican American students are slightly less likely to make a residential change without changing schools and are more likely to

change schools without changing residences than their non-Latino White peers. So while families may instigate student mobility in the wake of a residential move, the data in Table 2 suggest that residential mobility is not the only factor contributing to the incidence of mobility: adolescents themselves, and also school personnel, are instigating student mobility. In California, for example, students initiated nearly half of the cases pertaining to the most recently reported change of school, and were much more likely than students in other states to be subjected to school-initiated transfers (Rumberger et al., 1999).

Table 2. Disentangling residential and student mobility (percent distribution)

Mobility Patterns	Mexican Americans	Non-Latino Whites
Moved Residence	37	31
… and changed schools	55	49
… and did not change schools	**45**	**51**
Did Not Move Residence	63	69
… and changed schools	15	9
… and did not change schools	85	91
Total	100	100
Proportion of school changes not associated with a change of residence	**30**	**27**

Note: Student and residential mobility from grades 8-12 based on data from NELS 12th grade student questionnaire. Student mobility excludes school changes due to promotion from elementary to middle school and from middle school to high school. Source: National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988, panel of 1988 eighth-grade students resurveyed in 1990 and 1992, excluding dropouts. Statistics weighted (f2pnlwt/mean f2pnlwt).

Student-Initiated Mobility. Given the increased autonomy that coincides with adolescent development, it is not surprising that high school students sometimes make independent decisions to change schools. In fact, a large percentage of student mobility at the secondary level—nearly 50 percent in the state of California—is the result of student-initiated requests to change schools (Rumberger, et al., 1999). Among adolescent Mexican Americans who make their own decision to change high schools, reactive (as

opposed to strategic) mobility may be the norm (Ream, 2005a).

Unfulfilled reciprocity expectations, a breakdown in trust, or cultural and normative differences between minority students and mainstream school personnel can contribute to sudden and often mid-year school changes. Intimidation or overt racism may also cause some kids to change schools, but still others are motivated by loneliness, finding themselves bereft of a committed peer group, or feeling trapped in an uncaring school environment—sentiments that can cause despairing adolescents to look elsewhere for a sense of belonging. Although the causes of student alienation and subsequent transience are not always so obviously measurable, school ethnographies have identified a superficial notion of caring deployed by at least some school personnel that stands in stark contrast to students' ideas about what an authentic notion of caring should be. Angela Valenzuela's (1999) research among adolescent Mexican Americans is informative:

> When Mexican American youth reject schooling, they do so because their teachers do not fully apprehend their ethnic, social-class and peer-group realities, including their culture of caring. (Valenzuela, 1999, pp. 324-325)

Valenzuela suggests that different conceptions of caring can lead to a breach of trust between mainstream school personnel and non-mainstream students. Other studies demonstrate similar patterns of distrust and social distance between mainstream school personnel and minority youth (Sánchez-Jankowski, 1991), which may result in part from a lack of overlap in sub-cultural values and norms (Gibson et al., 2004). As a consequence, many students do not believe that teachers are highly interested in their well-being, and this perception promotes their disengagement from school.

School-Initiated Mobility. Besides student-initiated mobility, there is also the growing phenomenon of mobility as precipitated by the schools themselves (Gotbaum, 2002), known as an Opportunity Transfer or "OT." Although OTs are sometimes employed to address problems such as misbehavior or fighting in school, students are often transferred out for less egregious reasons, such as poor attendance or flagging grades. The latter comes in the context of policy changes that simultaneously demand greater school-level

accountability (e.g., the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001) and higher graduation standards for students (e.g., the California High School Exit Exam). Many calls for "school choice" reforms, including vouchers (and perhaps to a lesser extent charter schools), are premised on the market-based notion that parents can and should make strategic choices about the best place to educate their children. But school choice entails student mobility. And not all student mobility is strategic in nature. In fact, there may be some unforeseen aspects of choice and accountability-based reforms that actually encourage reactive kinds of student mobility. To wit, some teachers contend that the children of working class Latinos are particularly vulnerable to being transferred, involuntarily, to another school:

> My experience as a teacher—and I have a lot of it—is that schools transfer Hispanic kids because the parents will not protest… Hispanic parents are more fearful and more respectful. The middle class White parents would say, 'You're not transferring my kid!' (Ream, 2005a, p. 85)[20]

As emergent federal and state accountability schemes are putting increasing pressure on schools to demonstrate test-score improvement, the OT option seems likely to become an even more attractive tool both for removing troublemakers and for shuffling under-performing students elsewhere, so as not to tarnish schools' educational performance statistics. Finally, the increasingly intense focus on school-level accountability for test scores and graduation rates may inadvertently encourage administrators and other institutional agents to cast a blind eye to the needs of highly mobile student populations. If schools cannot, and are not encouraged to exemplify the sort of institutional staying power that helps keep students from changing schools, we may continue, instead, to exacerbate the "card-shuffling" process to the detriment of those students in our schools who face the most explicit educational challenges.

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Policy Considerations

What can and should be done about student mobility and its impact on friendship networks and school completion among Mexican origin youth? If mobility is viewed largely as a strategic activity initiated by students and their families to serve their own interest and educational preferences, then any response to this issue should be directed toward them. And there may be little that should be done to prevent mobility when it is a result of families' decisions to change jobs or residences. In this case, the only response is perhaps to inform students and parents about the possible social and educational problems that can result from changing schools (Rumberger et al., 1999). But from the evidence presented above we are faced with the need for educational stakeholders to address the adverse social and educational impacts of student mobility—effects that belie the notion that student mobility can be viewed only as an effective school choice strategy initiated by savvy education consumers. To prevent the more reactive and less strategic kind of student mobility and to mitigate its potentially harmful social and educational effects, we identify in the following sections possible responses that could be initiated by education policymakers across federal, state, and local jurisdictions.

Accountability Mechanisms for Mobile Students.

In today's accountability-oriented environment, and particularly in the wake of the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act, there may be inherent disincentives for schools to work toward the retention of transient youth and families. By enrolling higher performing students while encouraging academically challenged students to head elsewhere, schools can boost overall test score performance and reduce dropout rates. Working-class Mexican origin youth may be particularly vulnerable to the "card shuffling" that results when school administrators push underperforming students out their doors, often by employing practices with such euphemistic names as Opportunity Transfers. Certainly, this is a disturbing shortcut to "success"—and one that has been thoroughly reported in a recent series of articles in The New York Times (Medina & Lewin, 2003; Lewin, 2004). Education policymakers and schools must grapple honestly with accountability incentives that implicitly encourage the removal of under-performing students.

Hold School Districts Accountable

Beyond examining aggregate test scores of individual schools (a method that might reward schools for using OTs to distribute at least some of their charges elsewhere), we should also measure accountability more broadly, at the school district level. Indeed, student mobility is best understood as an intra-district phenomenon that occurs within a localized geographic area.[21] If the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provision of NCLB was redefined in such a way that it could function as a district and a school performance standard, such a policy might encourage (a) effective district-level strategies to counter reactive student mobility, and (b) a greater degree of between-school coordination and collaboration to assist mobile students with the school-to-school transition process. Thus, high rates of non-promotional student transience could be seen for what they really are, and schools could rightly see themselves as part of the solution to the wider problems within a district. In short, accountability mechanisms should be adjusted to draw district- and school-level distinctions regarding student mobility in order to develop a better incentive structure for systemic educational reforms (Offenberg, 2004).

Report Cohort Mobility Rates

What specific forms of accountability might be established so as to encourage districts and secondary schools in particular to undertake efforts to reduce reactive student mobility? Extra funding to document cohort graduation rates (the proportion of students who graduate from a specific entering class or cohort of students) would also reveal the number of students from each cohort who left before completion—the cohort mobility rate (Rumberger et al., 1999). Measuring mobility rates in this way would provide a partial reflection of a school's "holding power," by which we mean a school's capacity to engage students in the educational process so as to assure more stable student populations. Schools could be evaluated over set periods to measure increase or decrease in overall rates of student transience by way of comparison to base year figures. Those schools that succeed in reducing the incidence of reactive mobility across time could be rewarded for promoting a more stable educational environment precisely because it is likely to have direct bearing on the standards of educational achievement for all students who participate in such a system.

> *Education policymakers and schools must grapple honestly with accountability incentives that implicitly encourage the removal of under-performing students.*

Position Schools at the Center of Social Capital Development

We assert here that secondary schools can be better designed to act as the impetus for social capital development among working-class minority youth across family, peer, school, and community domains. Current educational experiments and model intervention programs—particularly those that tap into the value of healthy and reciprocal social relationships—are improving the lives of students from low-income households and communities (Maeroff, 1998; Stanton-Salazar, Vásquez & Mehan, 2000). We propose that such programs offer helpful guidelines as to how we can re-design schools that serve highly transient youth of Mexican origin. In the remaining pages we call attention to innovative programs that deserve attention from school reformers and policy-makers. A close examination of these programs—each of which draws upon the power of relationships and resources inhering within social networks—reveals two essential components that are given brief consideration below.

The School Component

• "Newcomer Clubs": Many schools have responded to the regular entrée of new students by instituting programs designed to smooth the transition process. One southern California high school, for example, implemented a comprehensive plan to reduce mobility and mitigate its negative effects by encouraging new arrivals to join the "Newcomers Club," which meets weekly with school counselors. Parents of transient youth are also provided extra opportunities to meet with school counselors in order to build and strengthen a home-school connection. A Maryland suburban high school implemented a similar program, initiating a "New Student Support Group" in which counselors meet weekly with new students to provide information about the school and to discuss students' concerns about relocating (Wilson, 1993).

• Student/Counselor Relations: Since school counselors are largely responsible for guiding mobile students on both the departure and arrival ends of the school transfer process, bolstering the bi-lingual and bi-cultural counseling staffs at schools serving especially transient Mexican origin youth would undoubtedly help mitigate the potential negative impacts of student mobility. Yet even the most optimistic estimates of the current national average, according to which there is one guidance counselor for every 600 students, paints a less than rosy picture of what appears quite literally to be a lonely profession. Counselors offer even less advising in California, where the counselor-to-student ratio is a paltry 1:979 (McClafferty, McDonough & Nuñez, 2002). Shoring up student-counselor relations is an essential part of the most effective interventions. The Puente Project, another well-studied program, is designed to enhance the resource exchange potential inherent in students' social networks, and so targets Latino freshmen and sophomores across a wide achievement spectrum, offering to help them graduate and go on to college (Gándara, 2002). The counseling component is largely designed to ensure that Puente students are placed in college preparatory classes and offered the information necessary to prepare for college eligibility. Counselors supervise college visits, initiate meetings between parents and Puente personnel, and even oversee the extramural Puente Club through which students socialize and make friends in structured extracurricular environments.

The Peer Group Component

The findings in this study corroborate others that emphasize the essential role of peers in adolescent development (Harris, 1998) and Mexican American student success (Gibson et al., 2004). So it is hardly surprising that peer group support is another key aspect of many successful programs, including the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program which now has many sites across the U.S. To us, AVID seems to be outstanding for its particular sensitivity to the notion that underachieving ethnic or linguistic minority students from highly transient low-income families might benefit from the thoughtful reorganization of social life in and beyond the school. AVID taps the resources that inhere in students' social networks by valuing the fundamental role and simultaneous (if not collaborative) social support of all key parties: parents, the peer group, school personnel, and community agents. By helping students become part of a trusting, school-oriented

network of peers—one in which they share common educational goals—AVID reframes achievement as a collective experience rather than as an individual one. This is done by bringing mid-performing adolescents together in collaborative learning environments—study groups, reader-writer workshops, and a special elective class that meets for one academic period a day, 180 days a year, for three or four years (Mehan et al., 1996; Gándara et al., 1998).

What we should value from the various programs noted above is the paradigmatic approach they take in working with students from groups that have historically been most underserved by our school system. Of foremost value is the operating assumption that these students can indeed succeed in school, in spite of the many economic hardships they and their families endure. Notably, such success is predicated upon the very intentional design of a stable and consistent social support system around each student—a system that functions across family, peer, school, and community domains as a countervailing force in their lives (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). [22]

Summing Up

In the concluding sections of this policy brief we have emphasized the importance of changing basic features of school accountability schemes so as to improve the way we address the problematic incidence of student transience among adolescents of Mexican descent. We have also recommended an intervention approach oriented toward increasing students' stock in empowering forms of social capital. However, we must also assert that these reform efforts alone will not solve the inter-connected problems of student mobility, social de-capitalization, and dropout among Mexican origin youth. Given the significant impact of socioeconomic status on school completion and dropout, we must also acknowledge that social reforms that address working-class income and wealth disparities must accompany more direct school reform efforts (Anyon, 2005).

Broad economic indicators suggest, however, that market forces and domestic social policy have been marching, for some time, in just the opposite direction (Congressional Budget Office, 2003). Without a renewed commitment to economic and political reforms designed to stymie growing resource inequality,[23] youth of Mexican origin will continue to demonstrate high mobility patterns and suffer its adverse

effects on school completion—in spite of the thoughtful strategies educators and education scholars may design to curtail reactive student mobility and thereby augment students' social capital.

Notes

[1] Social capital generally refers to the ability of individuals to command limited resources by virtue of their relationships or membership in broader social structures (Portes, 1998). Social capital is made up of resources that may be converted into material capital (Bourdieu, 1986), human capital (Coleman, 1988) and healthy civic participation and community cohesion (Putnam, 2000). Notions of the educational utility of social capital should interest policymakers who are seeking creative solutions to social problems (Ream, 2005a).

[2] We used the National Educational Longitudinal Survey of 1988 (NELS:88), a national longitudinal panel study of a cohort of approximately 25,000 8th graders begun in 1988 and continued until 1994. The NELS data are well suited for this investigation because they contain extensive information on family background, student mobility, and social interaction among Mexican American adolescents over time. It is possible to examine the impact of student mobility and friendship networks on high-school graduation because members of the follow-up sample were tracked whether they remained in school or dropped out—for as long as they continued to reside in the United States. For further information on NELS:88, see http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/nels88.

[3] In his prior work, Ream used weighted panel data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88) to illustrate mobility rates (excluding dropouts) among youth of Mexican origin.

[4] We use National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) data drawn from the panel of base-year (1988) students who were re-surveyed in 1990 and 1992 (N=16,489). The final sample includes 1,335 Mexican Americans. These data measured a variety of social network characteristics and educational outcomes of 8th grade students over their high school careers, starting in 1988.

[5] We searched NELS:88 for variables approximating direct peer-to-peer interaction, since variables of this nature enable social capital to be measured both in terms of quantity (i.e., the existence of a relationship) and quality (i.e., the nature of that relationship). And since adolescents' social networks are amenable to the "upside" of social capital as well as its largely overlooked "downside" (Portes and Landolt 1996), we juxtapose a latent (multi-item) measure entitled Friends Value Education with a single item, Number of Dropout Friends. Friends Value Education is comprised of five NELS items reflecting school-oriented friendships (Chronbach's alpha = .87 for the sample of 1,335 Mexican Americans). It represents students' perceptions of their friends as measured by the following questions: "Among the friends you hang out with, how important is it to attend class regularly (F1S70A), study (F1S70B), get good grades (F1S70D), finish high school (F1S70F), and continue education past high school (F1S70I)?" Of course, adolescents lack complete knowledge about what their friends think and do. And perceived reports may consist of students' projections of their own values onto others—a bias that has been targeted as a weakness of research on peer dynamics (Kandel 1996). But the use of students' perceptions of their peers is often justified by the reasoning that what adolescents think their friends do may be even more influential than what their friends actually do (Ryan 2000). Number of Dropout Friends (F1S69) is a single-item student response to the following NELS survey question: "Altogether, how many of

your close friends have dropped out of school without graduating?" While F1S69 provides information on the actual number of a student's friends who have dropped out of school, it does not tell us the proportion of a particular student's friends who dropped out.

[6] Because the NELS study excluded students who were unable to fill out a questionnaire in English during the first year (base-year) of the study, Limited English Proficient (LEP) students are underrepresented in the NELS 8th grade panel data that we use here. To the extent that mobility and dropout rates among LEP students were higher than other students—the 44% dropout rate for Latino 16-24-year-olds born outside the United States was double the 21% rate for those born in the U.S. (NCES, 1998a)—these results probably under-report student mobility and dropout among Mexican American students.

[7] While a considerable portion of students in the final sample (N=1,335) are missing at least some 10th grade follow-up information, they are retained in the predictive analyses through imputation techniques to make the sample larger and more plausibly representative of disadvantaged students who did not answer all the questions in the survey. The MPLUS structural equation modeling software confronts missing data with estimation by full information maximum-likelihood (FIML) instead of relying on ad-hoc methods like listwise or pairwise deletion, or mean imputation. Unlike many other imputation methods, FIML estimation uses all the information from the observed data, estimating a coefficient for the relationship between variables (the missing data are built directly into the estimation method), as opposed to imputing a value for an otherwise observed variable.

[8] For example, if student mobility, friendship networks, and high school completion were related to family socioeconomic status, then such an analysis might reveal that school changes between grades 8 and 12 as well as adolescent friendship networks may have little direct impact on high school completion after controlling for the impact of socioeconomic status on high school completion.

[9] The models in Figures 4-6 incorporated analytic weights to compensate for non-random sampling techniques and unequal selection probabilities, and to allow extrapolation of the results to the represented target population. The indices used to test the fit of the models are the Tucker-Lewis index (TLI), comparative-fit index (CFI), and root-mean-square-error-of-approximation (RMSEA). TLI and CFI are practical fit indices designed to address sample size issues; values of .9 and above indicate reasonable model fit. RMSEA is sensitive to the number of estimated parameters, acting as a barometer in estimating model parsimony. RMSEA values of .08 or less indicate reasonable model fit (Browne and Cudeck 1993).

[10] The parameter estimates are standardized, enabling comparison of the magnitude of effect of each path in the figures. The latent construct entitled, Friends Value Education is made up of multiple observed variables and therefore appears in the figures as an oval, according to structural modeling convention. For the sake of clarity, we also exclude the observed variables and error terms associated with Friends Value Education.

[11] Note, too, that as SES increases, students are less likely (-.13 SD) to befriend school dropouts.

[12] Of the achievement-related research on mobility at the secondary school level, one study of 643 ninth graders found that mobility negatively impacts student performance in mathematics (Benson & Weigel, 1981). But mobility studies that account for background characteristics, such as family structure and socioeconomic status, offer mixed results (Rumberger, 2003; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Swanson & Schneider, 1999).

[13] One longitudinal study found that even after controlling for a variety of family background variables, residential mobility reduced the odds of graduation (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994). Another nationally representative study shows that even controlling for a variety of family and community factors, students who made just one non-promotional school change between the 8th and 12th grades were less than half as likely to graduate from high school compared to students who did not make a non-promotional school change (Rumberger et al., 1999).

[14] Modeling refers to individual changes in behavior, cognition, or affect that result from the observation of others (Bandura, 1986; Ryan 2000).

[15] In effect, the social capital "upside"—aspects of friendship affiliations that are convertible into educationally beneficial outcomes—is accompanied by a potential downside exacerbated by student mobility (one additional school change at the secondary level increases mobile students' propensity to associate with others who have dropped out of school, per Figure 4).

[16] Analysis available from authors upon request.

[17] Close-knit and trusting peer interactions – what some anthropologists and cultural psychologists have termed *confianza en confianza* (Vélez-Ibañez 1997) – may be of particular value to Mexican American adolescents (Stanton-Salazar 2001). Roughly translated into "trusting mutual trust," *confianza en confianza* is a construct learned through intimate and often family-based social interaction among U.S. Latinos. As such, it functions as a vehicle for self-reference, social esteem, and cultural meaning-making (Montero-Sieburth & Villarruel 2000).

[18] Mobile students' proclivity toward association with dropouts has yet to be examined empirically, however.

[19] Rumberger et al. (1998) found that in California, Latino students were twice as likely as non-Latino White students to change high schools for reasons other than moving. And disciplinary problems predicted school mobility among California Latinos but not among Whites.

[20] Case studies of urban high schools document that school officials do actively try to get rid of "troublemakers" by forcing them to leave or telling them they must leave (Fine, 1991).

[21] Rumberger & Larson (1998) found that 80 percent of non-promotional school changes for a cohort of urban Los Angeles area Latino student were within the same district.

[22] See Stanton-Salazar's discussion of "counterstratification" influences (with the student, the family, school, and community) that act to both 'buffer' the student from negative ecological forces (e.g., gang violence) and to cultivate key forms of resiliency among low-status youth (2001, p. 22). See also Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2000) for an extended critical review on existing research on resiliency.

[23] See Richard Rothstein (2004) for recommended social and economic reforms geared toward forging a more effective and meritocratic system of education.

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