

WHAT HAPPENED TO STUDENT MOBILITY AFTER THE NEW ORLEANS' MARKET-BASED SCHOOL REFORMS?



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One argument for school choice is that parents will vote with their feet and move to better schools. This could create competition between schools that allows families to select the options that work best for them and induces all schools to improve. Advocates also argue that school choice will benefit low-income families the most because these families have the least choice and poorest options in traditional public school systems.

To make this competitive process work, students have to switch schools at least some of the time as they seek out better options. Less clear is whether the introduction of choice will increase or decrease mobility overall or change mobility patterns. On the one hand, with choice, families may make better initial choices and see less need to switch schools. Also, when students change households, school choice allows them to stay in the same schools since schooling options are no longer tied to housing location. On the other hand, switching schools becomes easier when schooling options are no longer tied to the neighborhood and this may increase mobility. Since research consistently shows that mobility leads to worse student outcomes, this could have negative consequences for students.

This brief examines student mobility in New Orleans before and after the school-choice reforms implemented in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. We ask three questions:

1. *What are the different types of mobility and why is each one important?* We identify three main types of mobility and argue that “non-structural” mobility is especially informative about the effects of school choice policies.
2. *How did the mobility rate change after the New Orleans school reforms?* We find that mobility in New Orleans has declined compared with the rest of Louisiana, suggesting that the New Orleans school reforms reduced mobility.
3. *How do mobility patterns vary by student group and according to the characteristics of sending and receiving schools—what we call “push” versus “pull” factors?* The results suggest that mobility has declined for students regardless of race and income. Also, New Orleans students typically move to higher-performing schools, but lower-performing students are more likely to move to schools with performance similar to the ones they left.

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DATA AND TYPES OF MOBILITY

We use enrollment and state test performance data from the Louisiana Department of Education from the 2001-02 to 2011-12 school years. In some analyses, we focus on the year just before Katrina (2004) and the last year of data we had available (2011) and measure mobility by changes in enrollment from October to October each year. Some students remain in the same school from one year to the next. Other students are “retained” in grade because of low test scores or other factors. This may artificially influence their mobility, so we treat them as a separate category. All other students

are mobile and we consider three different mobility types:

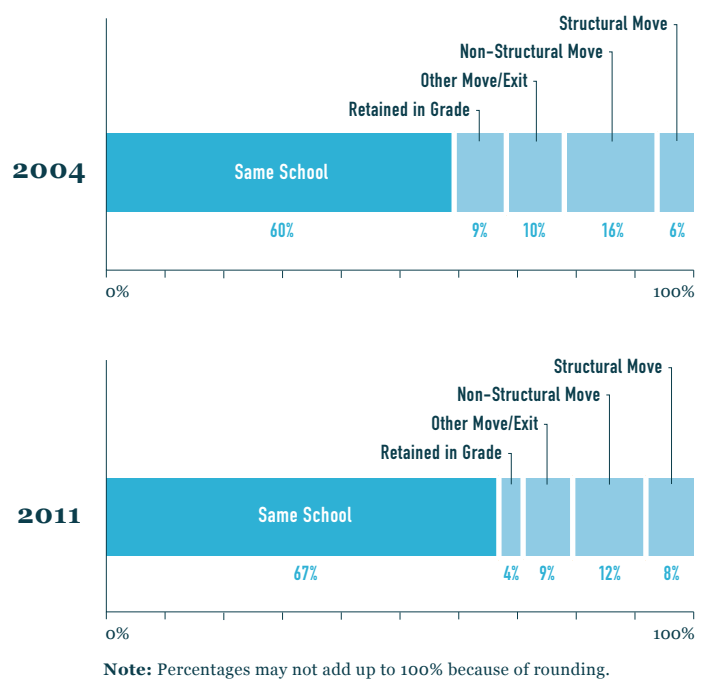
- *Structural:* Moves that students made when completing the last grade available in the school (for example, moving from a middle school to a high school) or when their schools closed.
- *Non-structural:* Moves that students made even though the next grade was offered at the school they left.
- *Other/Exit:* Moves to other public school districts or private schools, or students drop out of school.

In some parts of the analysis, we focus just on non-structural moves because these are most within the control of students and their families—and therefore most likely to reflect their choices. We also separate the results by elementary/middle schools and high school level, by student subgroup, and academic achievement level.

STUDENT MOBILITY TYPES AND TRENDS

In elementary/middle schools, overall mobility rates declined after the New Orleans school reform; 60% of students stayed in the same school in 2004 compared with 67% in 2011 (Figure 1a). Non-structural moves declined from 16% in 2004 to 12% in 2011.

Figure 1a. Elementary/Middle School Mobility Patterns, 2004 and 2011



In high schools, the percentage of students staying in the same schools decreased slightly (**Figure 1b**). For grades 9-11, 64% continued at the same school in 2004, and 62% did so in 2011. This appears to be mainly due to the increase in structural moves and the fact that some post-Katrina high schools did not cover all grades 9-12. There was also a very slight increase in the number of non-structural moves in grades 9-11, from 7% in 2004 to 8% in 2011.

Figure 1b. High School Mobility Patterns, 2004 and 2011



One potential concern with these conclusions about mobility is that more students who would have switched schools dropped out of school instead. However, we see no evidence of this. The number of “other moves/exits” dropped in both elementary/middle and high school.

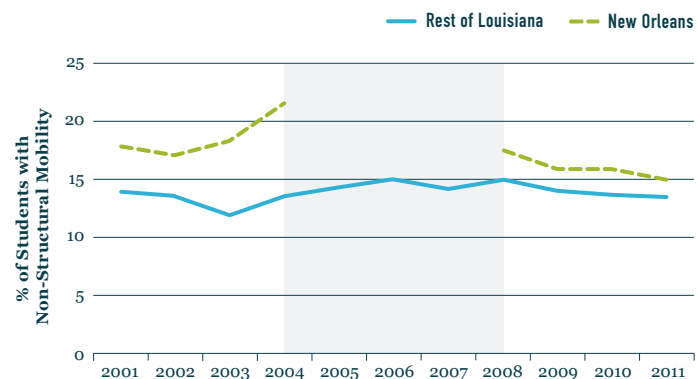
The results are therefore somewhat different between the elementary/middle and high school levels. Nevertheless, averaging across elementary/middle and high school levels, overall mobility and non-structural mobility declined. This holds even after accounting for the increase in mobility due to more frequent school closures, which are included in the “structural” category.

NEW ORLEANS MOBILITY COMPARED WITH THE REST OF THE STATE

To gauge the size of these mobility rates, it useful to compare New Orleans with the rest of Louisiana. Also, since we are interested in the influence of choice on mobility, it is worth limiting the analysis just to situations where students had the option to remain in their current school but chose to switch schools (non-structural moves).

Non-structural mobility rates in elementary/middle grades have been, and continue to be, higher in New Orleans than Louisiana as a whole. However, **Figure 2** shows that non-structural mobility in New Orleans decreased post-Katrina, narrowing the difference with the rest of the state.

Figure 2. New Orleans Mobility Trends compared with the Rest of the State



Note: The data are for elementary/middle schools only. Data for years 2005 to 2007 have been excluded because student mobility in these years is attributed to Hurricane Katrina.

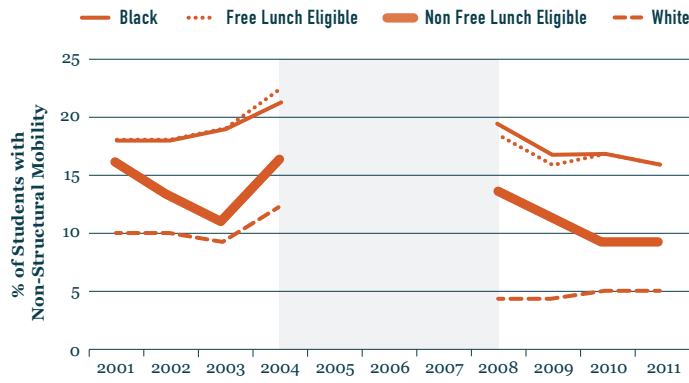
STUDENT MOBILITY IN NEW ORLEANS BY STUDENT AND SCHOOL SUBGROUP

To better understand changes in student mobility over time in New Orleans, we separated non-structural mobility rates by student background, prior achievement, and school governing agency. Since mobility rates change from year to year, we draw conclusions based on the average of the pre- and post-Katrina years.

Non-structural mobility rates for black students and low-income (lunch-subsidy eligible) students have been higher than others across all years, though mobility has declined for all student groups. Mobility has declined for all student groups, but differences

in mobility between black and white students and students not receiving a lunch subsidy have grown (Figure 3a).

Figure 3a. New Orleans Structural Mobility Trends, by Student Background

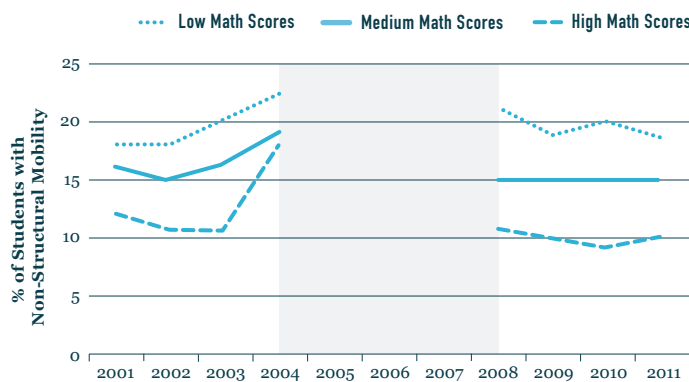


Note: The data are for elementary/middle schools only. Data for years 2005 to 2007 have been excluded because student mobility in these years is attributed to Hurricane Katrina.

We also placed students into three groups based on their scores relative to students in the state as a whole. Since the average New Orleans test score falls below the state average, almost half of New Orleans students are in the “low math scores” group in Figure 3b.

Not surprisingly, students with higher scores are less mobile and this gap widened somewhat after the reforms were put in place. Mobility has decreased for students with medium and high test scores, but remained fairly steady for students with low scores.

Figure 3b. New Orleans Structural Mobility Trends, by Students’ Prior Achievement Level



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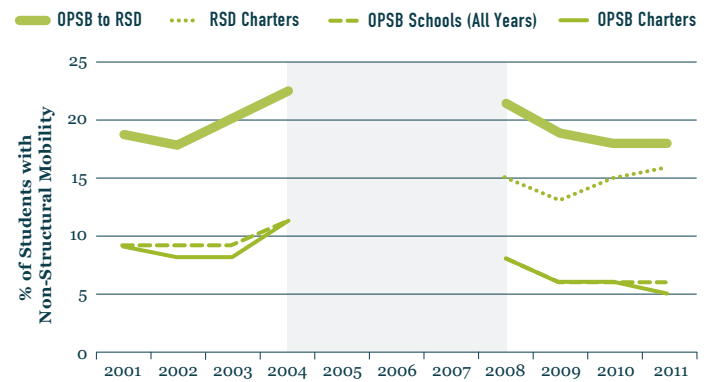
“ Mobility has declined for all student groups, but the differences in mobility between black and white students and students not receiving a lunch subsidy have grown. ”

While not shown in the figures, mobility rates for special education students are also higher than for non-special education students, though special education mobility rates declined by three percentage points after the reforms. By 2011, special education and non-special education mobility rates were identical.

The results in Figure 3c indicate that schools governed by the Orleans Parish School Board (OPSB) both before and after the reforms have mobility rates that are roughly half the size of those that were eventually taken over by the Recovery School District (RSD). In the post-reform RSD, charter schools have had lower levels of mobility compared to RSD schools as a whole. (The other, non-charter RSD schools were directly run by the district, though these no longer exist.) OPSB schools have also seen declines in mobility.

The higher levels of mobility in RSD schools are most likely driven by the fact that they serve students who have lower incomes and lower initial test scores (see earlier figures).

Figure 3c. New Orleans Structural Mobility Trends, by Governing Agency



Note: The data are for elementary/middle schools only. Data for years 2005 to 2007 have been excluded because student mobility in these years is attributed to Hurricane Katrina.

“PUSH” VERSUS “PULL” ON STUDENT MOBILITY

School performance is a strong predictor of the volume of student moves between schools. In Louisiana, the state government reports the School Performance Score (SPS), which is based almost entirely on student test scores, and these scores are turned into letter grades A-F. We find that the greater the difference in SPS between a pair of schools, the greater the number of students leaving the lower performing school for the higher performing one. In 2011, a letter grade difference between pairs of schools (e.g., school grade D vs. C) was associated with a 60% increase in net moves toward the higher-performing school. This pattern was observed both pre- and post-Katrina, though it was slightly weaker before, when similar performance differences corresponded to only a 40% increase in student moves. This change could reflect the introduction of letter grades after the reforms, which simplified the information available to patterns and may have made them more responsive to this new metric. School letter grades are widely reported in the media and school marketing materials.

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We can also separate these results based on the characteristics of the sender and receiver schools. We consider important predictors of sending schools to be “push” factors—these are the factors pushing students out of their current schools. Conversely, when characteristics of the receiving schools predict mobility we consider these to be “pull” factors.

Our analysis suggests that SPS is a stronger push factor than pull factor, implying that students are more successful in exiting low-performing schools than they are in finding higher-performing schools to attend.

This difference is most apparent when looking at the differences in movements between low-achieving students and others. Medium-

and high-scoring students show a stronger tendency to move to higher-performing schools after leaving low-performing schools than low-performing students. If higher-scoring schools are more effective, then this pattern would tend to reinforce achievement gaps between low- and high-performing students.

DISCUSSION

Overall, student mobility has decreased since the implementation of post-Katrina reforms. There are several possible explanations. First, it could be that school choice allows families to get into their preferred schools early on, so there is less need for later mobility to find better schools. Similarly, the intense accountability may improve schools and make families less likely to want to move.

Second, Hurricane Katrina may have affected the housing market in ways that affected schooling moves. This is only plausible if housing mobility declined after Katrina, since housing moves tend to increase schooling moves. This seems unlikely, however. If anything, Hurricane Katrina probably generated higher rates of housing moves.

We also find that students are more likely to switch schools if they are starting off in a lower-performing school. This pattern is generally consistent with the arguments of choice advocates. That said, this study is not an evaluation of choice and competition per se. Rather, we view mobility as one lens for understanding how New Orleans-style reforms operate. (See additional related studies in the pull-out box.)

These results also reinforce prior research that market-based school reform increases stratification between schools. Low-performing students are less likely to move from lower-performing schools to higher-performing schools. While we cannot know the reasons for this difference, there are several possible explanations:

- First, we have found evidence in a prior study (see pull-out box) that low-achieving students value test-score-based measures of school performance differently than higher performing students. This is unlikely to be the sole explanation, however. Like higher-performing students, lower-performing students tend to leave lower-performing schools. Therefore, for this explanation to make sense, we would have to believe that lower-performing students value performance when deciding to leave a school but not when choosing a new one.

- Second, lower- and higher-performing student groups may not have equal access to information about the schools to which they transfer. Both groups have firsthand knowledge of the schools they want to leave. But families of higher-achieving students may have advantages that allow them to learn about new schools from broader social networks, visits to schools, or personal meetings with school leaders. If a lack of information is affecting the mobility of lower-performing students, then policymakers might consider additional programs that enable students from low-achieving schools to obtain firsthand knowledge of schools. Such programs could promote school visits through open houses or “shadow days,” or perhaps even facilitate meetings with current parents of the school.

- Third, schools could be cream-skimming higher achieving students and limiting the enrollment of lower performing students. Given the potential effect of the OneApp, we plan to explore the effects of this policy in the future.

While this analysis generates many new questions, it also provides a new and in-depth way of looking at student mobility data. By distinguishing the different types of mobility, highlighting the different drivers of each type, and breaking down the results into push and pull factors, we are able to provide a more nuanced understanding of how New Orleans-style school reforms operate.



How is this Research Related to Other ERA–New Orleans’ Studies?

Our analysis of student mobility is closely connected to several other studies, especially those related to school choice:

- In *The Effects of the New Orleans School Reforms on Student Achievement*, Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen found that black and low-income students benefited from the New Orleans reforms in terms of higher achievement, but that white and higher-income students benefited more. This finding is echoed here by the fact that student mobility rates declined more for white and higher-income students (although mobility is not a direct measure of educational quality).
- In *What Schools Do Families Want (and Why)?*, Douglas Harris and Matthew Larsen find that low-income families seem to weigh the SPS less than higher-income families. This is similar to our finding here that low-income students do not tend to move to higher-performing schools. This study also describes the choice process in New Orleans before and after the reforms. (For a description of more recent choice policies, see *The New Orleans OneApp* by Douglas Harris, Jon Valant, and Betheny Gross.)
- Student mobility is determined partly on what schools

are available and how they respond to competition and try to attract families. In *How Do School Principals Respond to Competition?*, Huriya Jabbar finds some evidence of efforts to improve academic performance and program offerings, although most of these efforts seem to focus on marketing and surface-level improvements. Marketing could increase mobility as families move to schools expecting one thing and getting another. She also finds some evidence of cream-skimming, which may partly explain the increased stratification from mobility.

- Finally, there has been a general concern that there is too much instability in the new school system. Student mobility is one example. Teacher turnover is another. Unlike the present study, where we find a reduction in student mobility, Nathan Barrett and Douglas Harris, in their Policy Brief, *Significant Changes in the New Orleans Teacher Workforce*, find that teacher turnover nearly doubled after the reforms. This suggests that the system is more stable in some ways and less stable in others.

These studies and others can be found on our web site.

About the Education Research Alliance For New Orleans

The mission of the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans (ERA-New Orleans) is to produce objective and rigorous and useful research to support the long-term achievement of all students. Based at Tulane University, ERA-New Orleans is a partnership between university-based researchers and a broad spectrum of local education groups. Our Advisory Board includes (in alphabetical order): the Louisiana Association of Educators, the Louisiana Association of Public Charter Schools, the Louisiana Federation of Teachers, the Louisiana Recovery School District, New Orleans Parents' Guide, New Schools for New Orleans, the Orleans Parish School Board, the Orleans Public Education Network, and the Urban League of Greater New Orleans. For more information, please visit the organization's website:

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