

How Does Student Mobility Affect New Orleans Students?

Beth Glenn

This Research Snapshot was requested by NOLA Public Schools.

Overview

Student mobility is a common concern, particularly in high-poverty areas where mobility rates are high. There is [some evidence](#) that mobility may [undermine educational outcomes](#). A related concern is that school choice policies, which may have certain benefits, might lead to even higher mobility rates. Analyzing New Orleans students' school moves made between 2015-16 and 2018-19, I draw the following conclusions:

1. New Orleans' almost-all charter district and nearby Jefferson Parish's more traditional school district had similar levels of student mobility.
2. New Orleans students who were Black or economically disadvantaged moved more frequently than their New Orleans peers.
3. New Orleans students who moved one or more times had lower achievement outcomes before their moves than students who never moved.

This analysis focuses on moves that happened during the school year and those that occurred when students moved during the summer from a school that offered their next grade the following year. On one hand, these types of moves may have negative effects on student outcomes because students lose relationships from their previous school and may experience gaps or repetition in curriculum. On the other hand, students may benefit from such moves if they are moving to a higher quality school or a school that better suits their needs. While student mobility due to school closures and takeovers may occur in school choice settings, this study excludes such moves.

Background

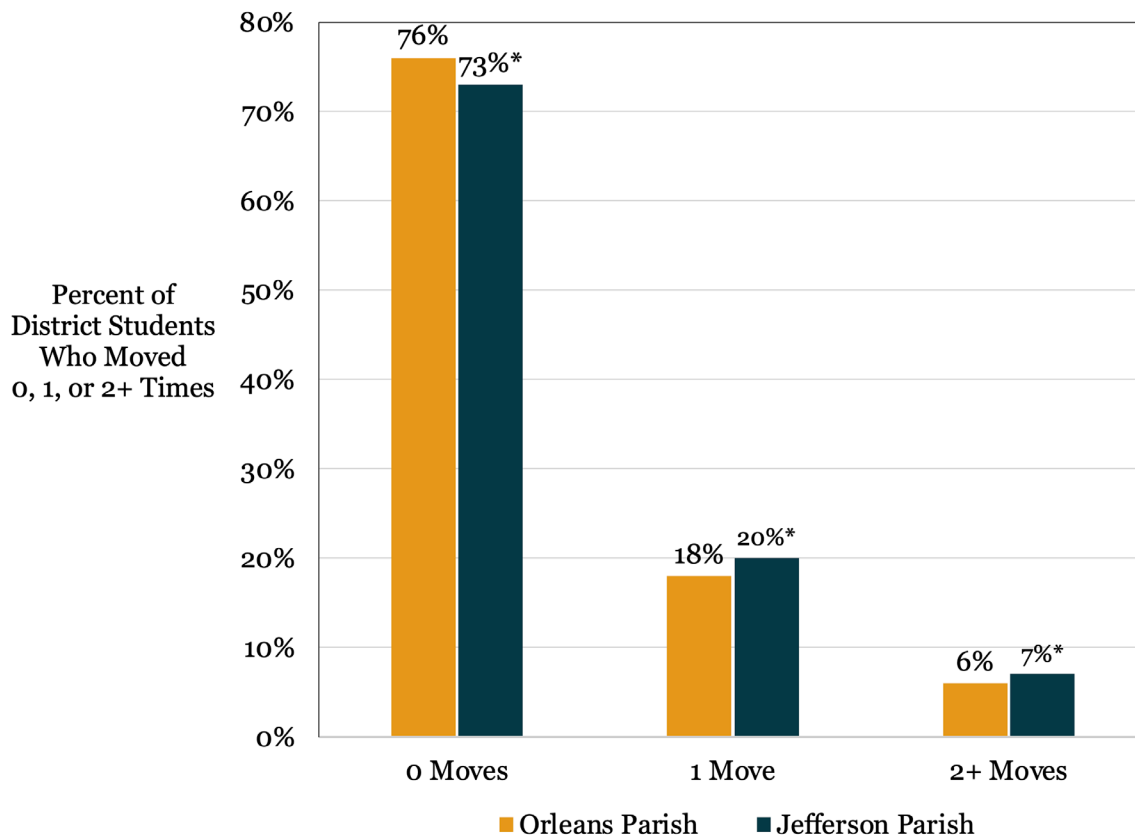
In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans underwent a series of reforms that converted almost all schools from traditional public schools to charter schools that are publicly funded and operated by nonprofit organizations. These reforms ended almost all residential rules on school enrollment and instead offered families the opportunity to apply to schools that best fit their needs regardless of where they live. School choice advocates argue that the city's transition to a charter model encourages competition between schools to improve school quality and offers low-income families more choice than the former system. Without residential restrictions on school enrollment, families have the freedom to apply to new schools as they choose. School and community leaders have raised concerns about the effects this might have on student mobility in New Orleans. While there might be good reasons for students to move, student mobility may disrupt education and relationships at school.

[Previous ERA-New Orleans research](#) shows that, following Hurricane Katrina and the school reforms that followed, student mobility in New Orleans decreased compared with the rest of Louisiana, regardless of race and income. One likely reason for this is that student mobility is often caused by residential moves that place students in new attendance zones of a traditional public school system. With school choice, and especially in New Orleans where charter schools are required to provide students with some form of transportation, residential moves need not lead to a change in schools.

Also, in an effort to reduce unnecessary moves between schools, New Orleans requires a hardship transfer application from families after a specific cut-off date early in the school year. This transfer application gives families a chance to specify what type of hardship necessitates a move to a different school and must be reviewed and approved by the school district's enrollment transition team. Overall, the nature of New Orleans' charter model offers a greater opportunity for students to elect to change schools. In this snapshot, we use data from 2015-16 to 2018-19 to examine how common student mobility is in New Orleans and which student populations are most likely to move.

Key Finding #1

New Orleans' almost-all charter district and nearby Jefferson Parish's residential school district have similar levels of student mobility.



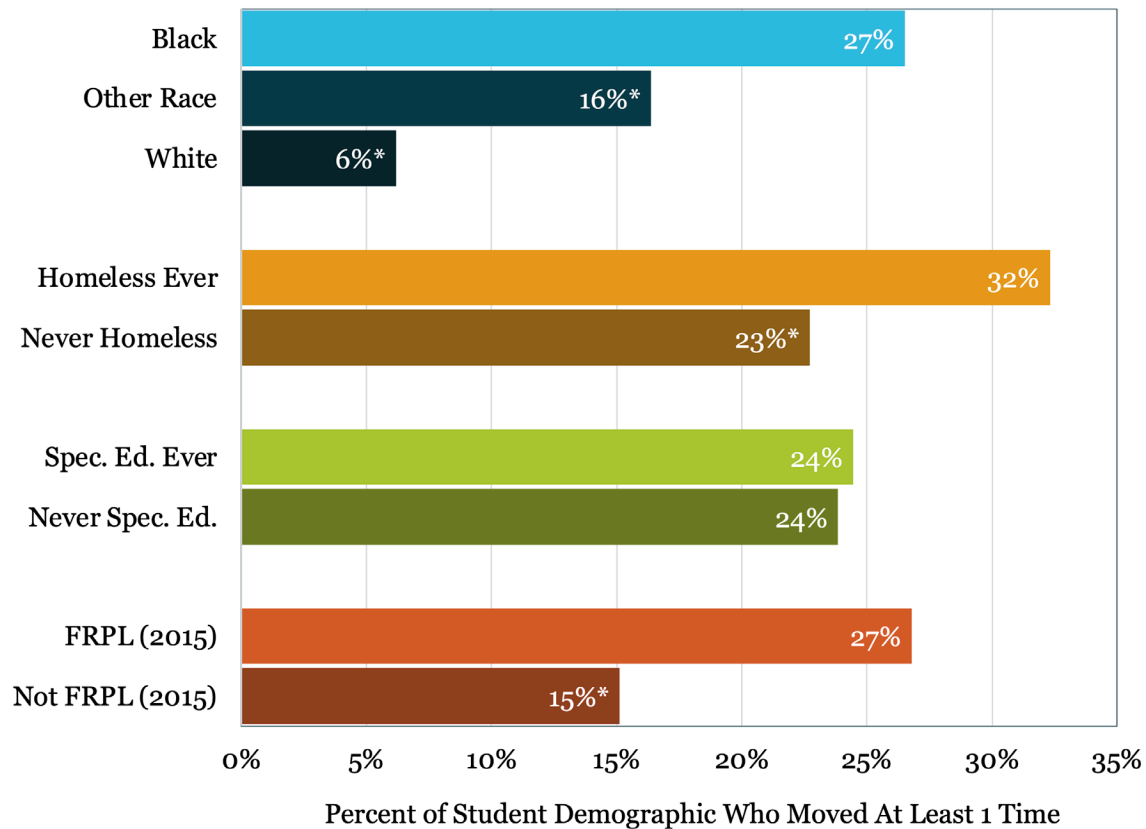
Notes: Includes moves that happened during the school year and those that occurred when students moved during the summer from a school that offered their next grade the following year. An asterisk indicates that the difference between the percent of students making a specific number of moves in Orleans and Jefferson Parish was significant at $p < 0.05$.

Over 75% of New Orleans students did not make any moves included in the analysis from 2015-16 to 2018-19. When comparing Orleans Parish to Jefferson Parish's public school district, which has a much smaller number of charter and magnet schools, we find that student mobility rates are similar. As shown in the figure above, Jefferson Parish experienced a slightly higher level of student mobility.

Exploring timing differences in student mobility trends between Orleans Parish and Jefferson Parish, we find that Orleans Parish experienced a higher level of student mobility during the summer while Jefferson Parish experienced a higher level of student mobility during the school year. Because Orleans Parish students changed schools in the summer more frequently than Jefferson Parish students, this finding suggests that Orleans Parish parents may have been intentional and strategic while Jefferson Parish moves were more likely to be the consequence of a residential move.

Key Finding #2

New Orleans students who were Black or economically disadvantaged moved more frequently than their peers.

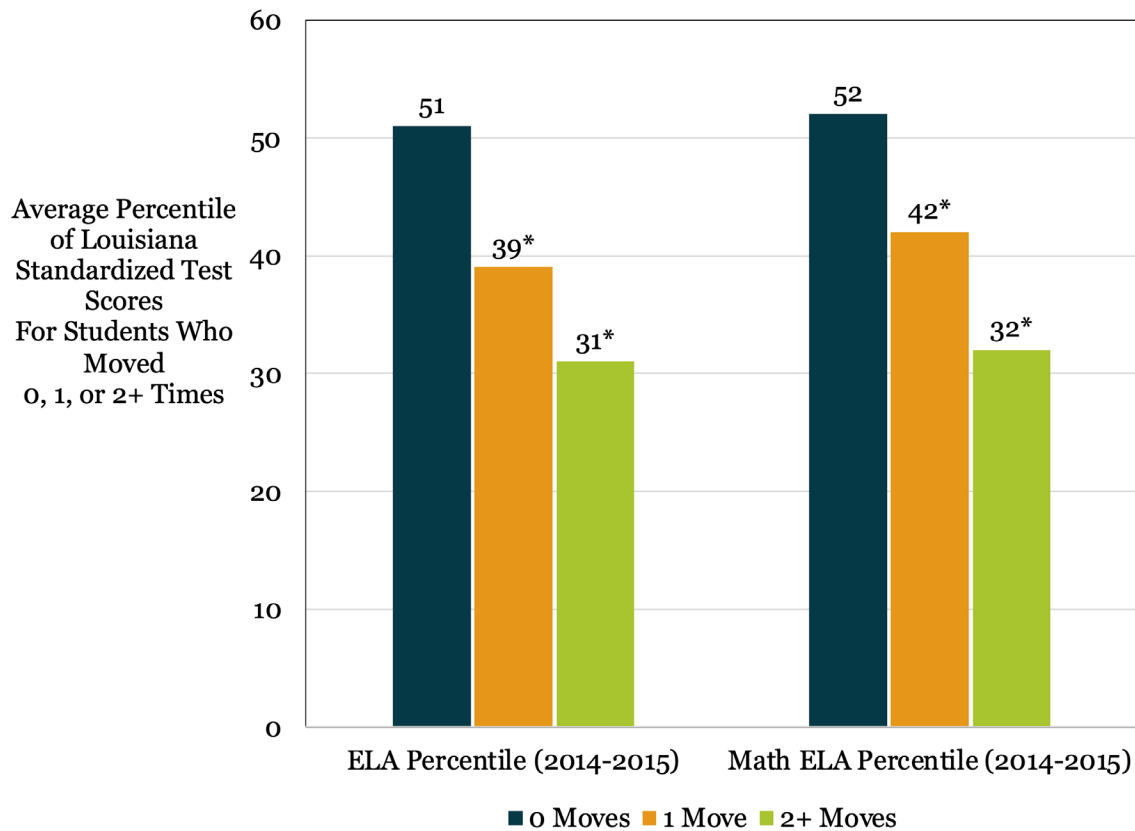


Notes: Includes moves that happened during the school year and those that occurred when students moved during the summer from a school that offered their next grade the following year. An asterisk indicates that the difference between the percent of students who moved between a specific group and its comparison group(s) was significant at $p < 0.05$.

When we look at New Orleans public school students from 2015-16 to 2018-19, we find that Black students moved more frequently than White students or students who identified as another race. Twenty-seven percent of Black students moved one or more times during this period, compared to 6% of white students and 16% of students who identified as another race. As the table above illustrates, students who ever experienced homelessness made more moves than students who did not, and students who received free or reduced price lunch in 2014-15 made more moves than students who did not. However, we find no difference in the number of moves between students who received special education services during this time period and students who did not receive these services.

Key Finding #3

New Orleans students who moved one or more times had lower achievement outcomes before their moves than students who never moved.



Notes: Includes moves that happened during the school year and those that occurred when students moved during the summer from a school that offered their next grade the following year. An asterisk indicates that the difference between the average percentile for the specified group and the group of students who had 0 moves was significant at $p < 0.05$.

When we look at New Orleans students who moved one or more times, we find that their ELA and math scores were lower than their peers prior to moving (in 2014-2015). Our findings suggest that students with lower academic achievement are more likely to change schools voluntarily. We attempted to estimate the effects of mobility on academic achievement, but the results were indeterminate and no clear findings emerged. [Previous ERA-New Orleans research](#) suggests that the effect of student mobility resulting from school closures largely depends on the quality of schools students end up in and how much disruption they experience.

Methodological Notes

The data for this brief come from deidentified administrative records collected by the Louisiana Department of Education (LDOE). This analysis explores student mobility within New Orleans Public Schools by student characteristics. In order to examine students least likely to change schools, students were included if they were in kindergarten through fifth grade and ninth grade in 2015-16. Since many New Orleans schools are divided kindergarten through sixth grade (elementary) and seventh through eighth grade (middle), students in kindergarten through fifth grade and ninth grade are more likely to be enrolled in schools that offer their next grade the following year. Students were only included if they attended an Orleans Parish or Jefferson Parish public school in all years from 2014-15 to 2018-19.

Students were considered “ever homeless” or “ever special education” if the student was classified as homeless or having an exceptionality at any point during the time period we examined (2014-15 to 2018-19).

We focused on moves that occurred even though a student’s current school offered the next grade the following year; we considered a school that had five or more students in that next grade the following year to “offer” a grade. Moves to or from alternative schools (defined by LDOE as schools with alternative services that are designed to meet students’ individual behavioral or academic needs) were not included in the analysis. We also dropped observations if a student’s enrollment stint (the time between their entrance and exit date at a school) was fewer than seven days long or if an enrollment stint was completely overlapped by another enrollment stint at a different school for the same student.

About the Author

Beth Glenn is a Non-Resident Research Fellow at the Education Research Alliance for New Orleans and a Health Economist at the Ochsner-Xavier Institute for Health Equity and Research.

About Our Research Snapshot Series

In this series of reports, we analyze data to inform New Orleans education policy and practice by answering questions asked by either our Advisory Board or NOLA Public Schools (NOLA-PS).

About ERA-New Orleans

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