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Research Brief:
Students Changing Schools During the School Year: Student Mobility in Virginia and the Challenged School Divisions

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Summary

• Stability and churn are two measures of mobility. Stability is defined as the total number of students continuously enrolled at a school, whereas churn is the total number of times students enter or exit a school.
• In 2014-15, Virginia students had a 94% stability rate and 16% churn rate.
• Stability rates have increased and churn rates have decreased since 2004-05 for Virginia statewide, Richmond, and Norfolk.
• Homeless students are more likely to be mobile with a 2014-15 stability rate of 70% and a churn rate of 89%.
• When students transfer out of one of the Challenged School Divisions, they are most likely to transfer to a contiguous division.

Background

Schools provide a critical environment for student development both mentally and socially. However, research shows that unscheduled movement between schools has negative implications for the achievement of not only mobile students, but also non-mobile students. School mobility suppresses achievement and leads to a higher likelihood of having an unrecognized educational need for mobile students, and reduces achievement gains of non-mobile students attending schools that receive mobile student transfers.

The Virginia Governor's Children's Cabinet commissioned this report to provide a rich descriptive picture of the within-year mobility in Virginia and in the three Challenged School Divisions in particular—Norfolk, Petersburg, and Richmond—between 2004-05 and 2014-15. We analyze first how mobility varies across divisions and grades. Then we examine when mobility occurs and where students move when they experience mobility. Finally, we compare mobility trends between homeless and all other students. We focus on homeless students as they typically experience higher rates of school mobility than other disadvantaged groups.

Data & Methods

We analyze data obtained through the Virginia Longitudinal Data System spanning the school years 2004-05 to 2014-15. We construct a database that includes a record for each school each student was enrolled in each year. Records include the entry and exit date for that specific record, which we use to determine mobility, as well as an indicator for homelessness as defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001. The analytic database consists of more than 14.2 million student-by-school-by-year enrollment records.

The analysis is descriptive and is intended to highlight policy-relevant patterns and correlations between student mobility and student characteristics. This analysis is not designed to highlight the causal effect of any of these characteristics on school mobility.

Findings

In 2014-15, Virginia saw a 94% stability rate statewide, meaning 94% of students were enrolled at the same school for the entire year. In the same year the churn rate was 16%, meaning 16 students exited or entered a school for every 100 enrolled. The three Challenged School Divisions experienced lower rates of stability—87% in Richmond and 88% in Norfolk and Petersburg—and higher rates of churn—26% in Norfolk, 31% in Richmond, and 37% in Petersburg. Stability rates, in the Challenged School Divisions, generally increase between kindergarten and the 8th grade, decrease meaningfully during the first year of high school and then increase again through the 12th grade.

Between 2004-05 and 2014-15, the stability rate increased in Virginia statewide by 1.5%, in Norfolk by 1%, and in Richmond by 8%. Petersburg decreased slightly by 0.2% (Figure 1). While stability rose, churn decreased by 18% in Virginia, 9% in Norfolk, and 34% in Richmond. The churn rate remained steady in Petersburg over this time. High school students experienced the greatest change in mobility over time, especially in

Figure 1. Stable enrollment rates by division and school year, 2005-05 to 2014-15
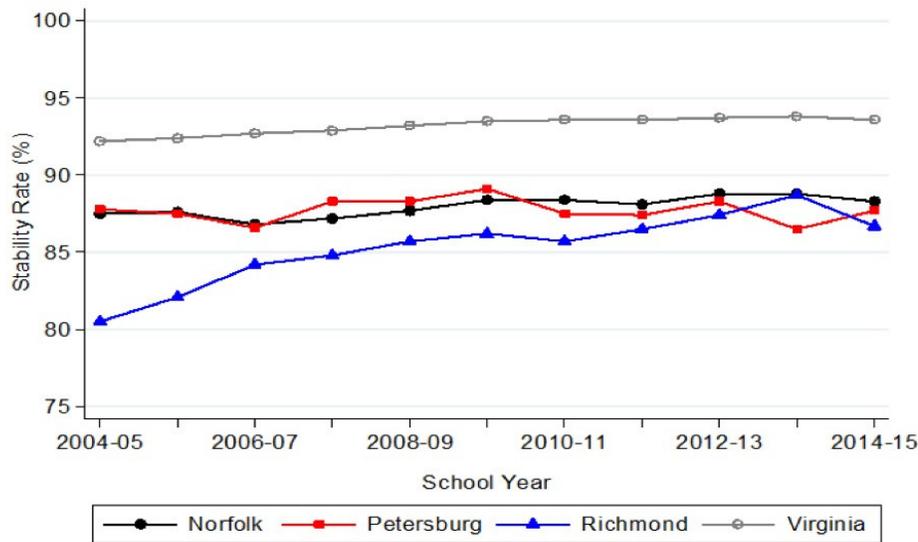
Richmond where students became less mobile as seen with stability increasing by 29% and churn falling by 33%.

Student mobility in 2014-15 was most likely to take place in the fall, specifically in September, and in the beginning of the month for Virginia statewide and the three Challenged School Divisions. Between 67 and 78% of students who moved from a Challenged School Division moved to a neighboring district.

Housing instability is a major contributor of student mobility. In 2014-15, the stability rate among homeless students (70%) in Virginia statewide was 25% lower than the rate for all other students. Homeless students were 28%, 24%, and 11% less likely to have stable enrollment in Norfolk, Richmond, and Petersburg, respectively, than other students. Similarly, churn rates were higher among homeless students than other students: 3.7 times higher in Norfolk, 1.7 times higher in Petersburg, and 3.1 times higher in Richmond.

Between 2008-09 and 2014-15, churn rates decreased and stability increased for homeless students while remaining relatively constant for other students. Homeless students in the three Challenged School Divisions experienced greater

change in mobility over time and within grade level than other students. Notably, Petersburg's 2008-09 and 2014-15 middle school and 2009-10 high school stability rates were about equal to those of all other students.

Policy Implications
This report provides an initial look at mobility in Virginia and its three Challenged School Divisions, as well as how mobility differs for Virginia's homeless students. While stability and churn rates are trending in the desired direction for Virginia's students, there is still room for improvement especially when considering the higher rates of mobility for Virginia's homeless and the decline in stability in Petersburg. Additional research can highlight the strategies divisions and schools are using to improve stability and determine how they may be replicated in other divisions.

Whatever policies and programs Virginia and school divisions choose to implement to address mobility should be designed around at least two goals: to reduce instances of mobility and, when mobility does occur, to ameliorate its negative consequences. This report leverages available data to provide valuable information to inform these policy discussions.